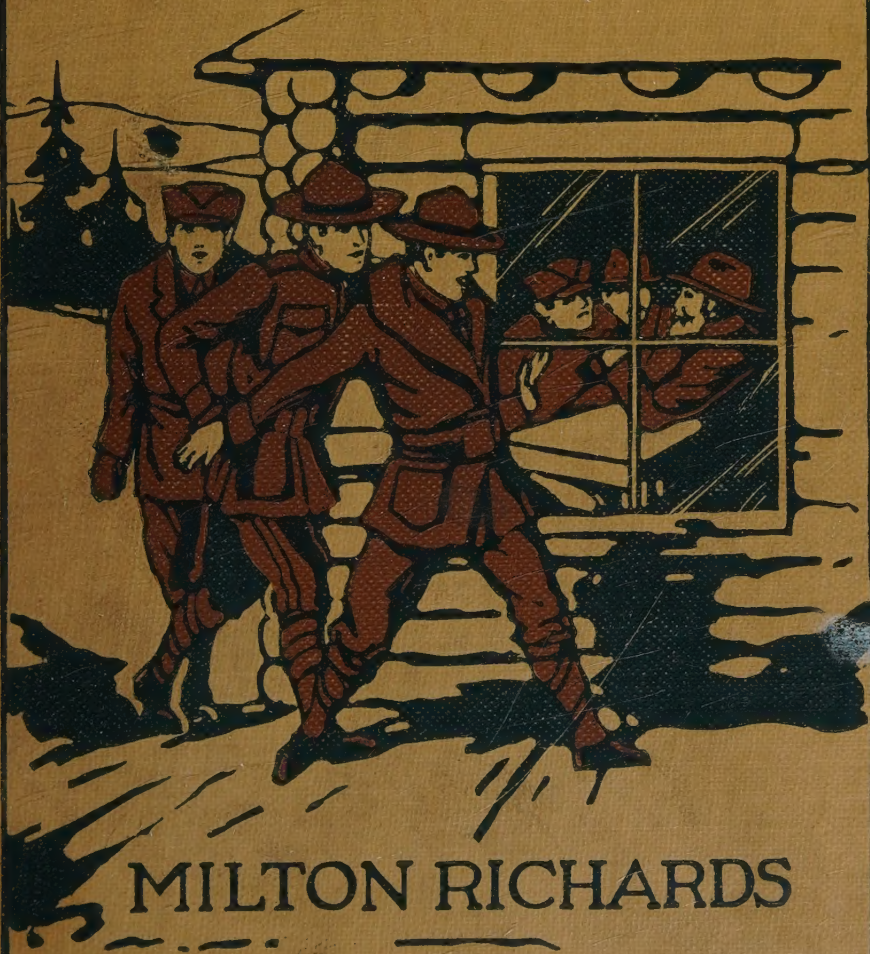
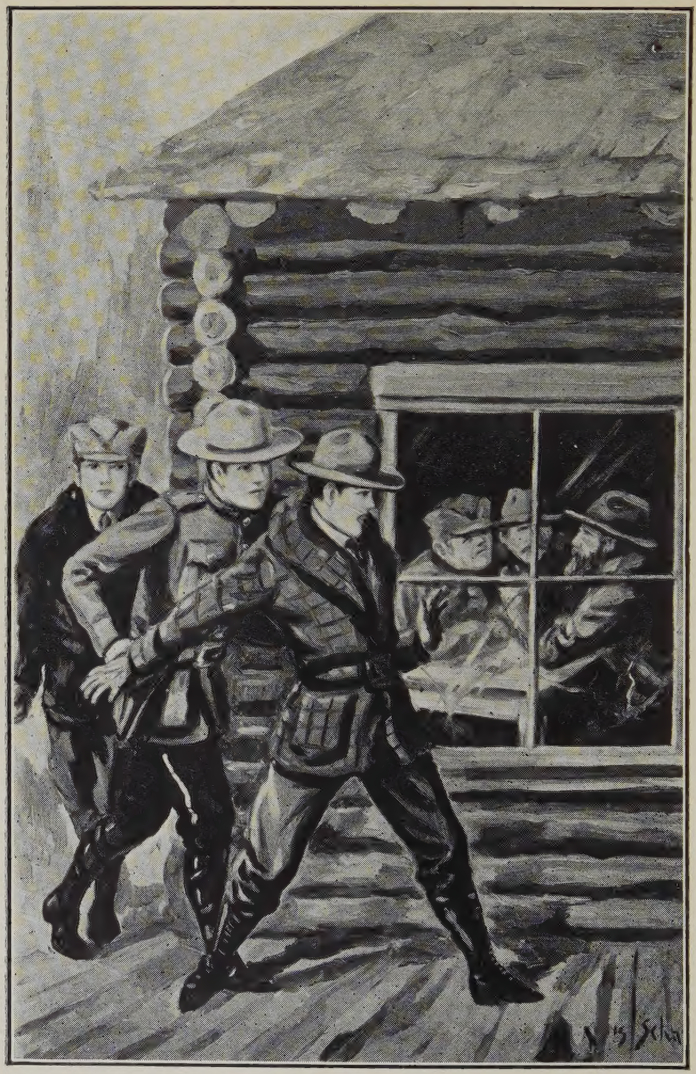
Dick Kent, Fur Trader



MILTON RICHARDS



Dick, happening to glance through the window, drew back suddenly with a cry of surprise.

(*Page 70*)

(*Dick Kent, Fur Trader*)

Dick Kent, Fur Trader

By MILTON RICHARDS

AUTHOR OF
"Dick Kent with the Mounted Police"
"Dick Kent in the Far North"
"Dick Kent with the Eskimos"
"Dick Kent and the Malemute Mail"

A. L. BURT COMPANY
Publishers New York
Printed in U. S. A.

Boys of the Royal Mounted Police Series

Stories of Adventure in the North Woods
FOR BOYS 12 to 16 YEARS

By MILTON RICHARDS

Dick Kent with the Mounted Police
Dick Kent in the Far North
Dick Kent with the Eskimos
Dick Kent, Fur Trader
Dick Kent and the Malemute Mail

Copyright, 1927
By A. L. BURT COMPANY

DICK KENT, FUR TRADER

DICK KENT, FUR TRADER

CHAPTER I

BLIND MAN'S PASS

DICK KENT, bronzed by exposure to wind and sun, leaned over the rough pine table in the trading room of Factor MacClaren at Fort Good Faith and listened intently to the conversation being carried on at that particular moment between Murky Nichols, prospector and gentleman of parts, and Corporal Rand of the Mackenzie River detachment of the Royal North West Mounted Police. On the paper in front of them, torn from a convenient packing case, were a number of irregular lines, dots and scrawls, which had been placed there with the aid of the stub of a lead pencil, held awkwardly in the hands of the big prospector.

"I want to show yuh," Nichols explained eagerly, "jus' where I think ol' Daddy McInnes crossed the Dominion Range. He travelled east an' then south until he got to Placer Lake, goin' through what the Indians call Blind Man's Pass. There ain't no other

way he could o' got through, sick an' worn out like he was. That pass must come out on this side of the range somewhere near where yuh picked up his body."

Corporal Rand drummed softly on the table and regarded Murky's animated face with thoughtful interest.

"Sounds reasonable," he commented. "In fact, that's exactly the way I had it figured out myself. Blind Man's Pass must be something more than a myth—a mere Indian legend. McInnes got through some way, travelling along a fairly well defined, not too difficult trail. No man can walk over Dominion Range, neither can he crawl under it. Yet McInnes came through. I have conclusive proof of that. But where is Blind Man's Pass?"

"It's there somewhere," Nichols declared doggedly.

"Certainly. I agree with you, Murky." The mounted policeman took the pencil from the prospector's hand and drew a straight line near the center of the map. "This line," he pointed out—Dick thought a little impatiently—"represents a distance of thirty miles. The country is rough, broken, almost inaccessible along its entire length. Somewhere within that thirty miles is a narrow opening, probably not more than fifty, a hundred or two hundred feet wide, which forms one end of what is called Blind Man's Pass. Now how are you going

to find it? There are a thousand different openings, all more or less alike. Attempt to follow any one of them, and you end up against a solid rock wall. You go back and start all over again somewhere else —and with the same result. I spent two weeks out there, going through the same stupid performance day after day. Only infinite patience or fool's luck will lead you to the right opening."

So interested had Dick Kent become that presently he crowded closer to the two men and began staring at the paper himself. Exactly what were they trying to do? What were they talking about? Who was McInnes, and why all this bother about a fabled trail through the mountains no one seemed to know anything about? He was interrupted in his train of thought by the next statement of the mounted policeman:

"McInnes had been dead more than a week when I found him. You could see the poor devil had been half-starved and had suffered every sort of hardship and privation. How he had managed to stagger along with that heavy load is more than I can imagine."

"Too bad ol' Daddy has passed," Murky sighed regretfully. "I 'member seeing him one time 'bout three years ago over in the Goose Lake country. Might' fine ol' man he was, an' a good trapper, folks said. Never failed to bring in a good catch ever' spring—mostly fox, marten an' beaver—an' he got

top prices 'cause he knew how to cure his fur—all prime, A-Number-1 stuff it was. He had a knack, almost amountin' to genius for locatin' black and cross fox an' then gettin' 'em to walk plump into his traps." Nichols paused to gaze reminiscently out of the window and to smile to himself. "Couldn't beat him that particular way, no, sir. A big catch ever' year—fortune for most men; yet Daddy allers complained that he wa'n't gettin' nothin' atall, that he was either gonna quit or cross the Dominion Range, where trappin' was a hull lot better."

"You're right about the black fox skins," remarked Corporal Rand, pushing the paper aside. "In the pack I found beside the body, there were eight of the shiniest, loveliest black pelts I've ever looked upon."

"An' he came through Blind Man's Pass," mused Murky. "The clever ol' coot. Too bad he didn't live to tell about it."

Dick had edged still closer. His eyes were shining with interest. He reached over and touched the sleeve of the corporal's scarlet tunic.

"Pardon me, Corporal Rand—but I've been eavesdropping. You don't mind, I hope."

The mounted policeman turned quickly and smiled into the eager face.

"Certainly not, you're welcome to any information or nonsense you may have heard. Isn't that the truth, Murky?"

"It sure is."

"And may I ask you a question?" Dick persisted.

"Yes," smiled Rand.

"What is Blind Man's Pass?"

"A reality or a legend—I'm not sure which. Outside of Daddy McInnes I'd say it was a legend. We used to laugh at the old tales about it. The Indians claimed that years and years ago one of their ancestors had discovered a long, narrow pass or defile that cut Dominion range somewhere due west of here. In 1895 a party of mounted police explorers investigated the story by making a very careful, painstaking search through all the country lying between Cauldron Lake and Summit River. Nothing came of it. The party decided that the tale was a myth. Blind Man's Pass was, until a few weeks ago, a bye-word among all the white men living in this section."

Corporal Rand paused and favored Dick with a most engaging smile.

"And what about Daddy McInnes?" the young man inquired.

"I'll give you the bald facts and you can draw your own conclusions. A little over a year ago Daddy McInnes left us. For years it had been his ambition to trap on the other side of the Dominion Range in what is commonly known as the Caribou Hills country. As the crow flies, Caribou Hills are less than three hundred miles away. It wouldn't have been much of a journey if McInnes could have gone

straight there, crossing the mountains. But, of course, he couldn't. He chose instead the more sensible and longer route by way of the Yellowhead Pass, which, as you know, is many hundred miles south of here. It took Daddy the greater part of one summer to make the trip."

Corporal Rand rose slowly to his feet and walked over to a window, gazing somberly out across a bleak, snow-streaked meadow that extended west and north to meet the encroaching woodland. He swung about presently, and continued:

"But Daddy came back. What motive prompted him, I have no way of finding out. All I know is that he did come back—but not by the Yellowhead route! I came upon his dead body less than a week ago. It was lying in a sheltered spot near a little knoll, less than a hundred yards from the banks of Run River. It was easy to determine the cause of his death. He died of starvation and exposure. McInnes is an old, old man and this last trip had proved too much for him."

"And you don't think that he had contrived somehow to cross over the range?" queried Dick.

"Absolutely, utterly impossible."

"If he didn't come by the Yellowhead route, or cross the mountains—"

"The only possible solution is Blind Man's Pass," interrupted Corporal Rand.

"But you can't find it."

"I haven't yet. But I have every hope that we will in a very short time. The best scout and woodsman who ever enlisted in a service of the R. N. W. M. P. is out there now looking for it—a man called Malemute Slade."

"Malemute Slade!" shouted Dick, clapping his hands in glee. "Why, corporal, I know him. He's a friend of mine."

"I'm glad to hear that. I knew that Slade was well acquainted with Factor MacClaren's nephew, Sandy. Are you by any chance the Dick Kent, who accompanied Sandy last summer to Thunder River in search of a gold mine?"

"Yes," answered Dick.

Corporal Rand laughed as he extended his hand.

"I guess that we'll shake on that. The mounted police haven't forgotten the incident. Time and time again, before a crackling fire, when we happened to meet on patrol, Sergeant Richardson entertained me with the history of your exploits."

"We had a lot of trouble with the Henderson gang," stated Dick.

"So I heard. Fortunately they're wiped out. They were the worst band of outlaws that ever infested the North. By the way, what ever became of that young Indian lad, Toma, who used to accompany you on so many of your expeditions?"

"He's out with Sandy right now on a hunting trip," Dick replied. "I'm expecting them back today."

Murky Nichols rose lazily, yawned, and stretched himself to his full length.

"Well, I guess I'll toddle along," he announced. "Hope yuh find that pass, corporal."

With a friendly nod to Dick in passing, Nichols strode over to the counter before which a small group of half-breed men, women and children chatted volubly.

No sooner had the prospector passed out of hearing, than Rand turned eagerly to Dick:

"Ever meet Murky before?"

"No," answered Dick in surprise, "but I've heard of him.

"Queer character," mused Rand, half to himself. "Sometimes bears watching."

"What do you mean?" asked Dick, a little startled.

"Murky's intentions are the best in the world, but his sense of right and wrong is considerably clouded. Also, you may or may not have heard, Nichols has the reputation of being the laziest mortal on earth and one of the shrewdest. He has money but seldom works. For months past I've been trying to find the key that will open the secret to Murky's checkered past."

Slightly annoyed at Rand's garrulity, Dick looked up sharply. Well he knew that no self-respecting

member of the force became so confidential in so short a time with a comparative stranger. For the most part, the men of the Royal Mounted were reserved, dignified and aloof. It was none of Dick's business what sort of a man Murky was.

"What bothers me," Corporal Rand hastened on, "is why Nichols should be so interested in Blind Man's Pass. This is the third time he's troubled himself to seek me out and pester me with questions."

"It's an interesting topic," said Dick. "I don't know as I blame him very much. Don't forget, corporal, that I've just been bothering you with questions myself."

"But you're different."

"You've known Nichols longer than you've known me," Dick shot back, somewhat testily.

"All right, Dick," grinned the corporal, "I'll accept your reprimand. And, come to think of it, I've got a note for you. It may possibly explain why I do not hesitate about taking you into my confidence."

"A note!" gasped Dick.

"Yes, it's self-explanatory."

Dick received the missive and opened it, considerably perplexed. He read quickly:

"Dear Richard:

I'll be very grateful to you for any assistance you may be able to render to the bearer of this

note, Corporal William Rand, of the Mackenzie River detachment. Corporal Rand will instruct you in certain matters of extreme importance. Please trust him implicitly in everything.

Please convey my very best wishes to Mr. MacClaren and your two young cronies, Sandy and Toma.

Sincerely,

Henry C. Richardson,
Sergeant R. N. W. M. P."

When Dick had finished reading the letter, he looked across at Corporal Rand with new understanding in his eyes.

"I'll help, of course. There isn't anything I wouldn't do for Sergeant Richardson."

"That's splendid of you."

The mounted policeman moved closer and spoke in a low tone.

"Sit down at that table and pick up that old magazine. Pretend you're reading. Watch Nichols. In ten or fifteen minutes two half breeds will enter this room and will probably walk over and engage Murky in conversation. You won't be able to hear a thing they say, but I want you to notice particularly whether or not any money passes between them."

Dick had scarcely recovered from his astonishment, when Corporal Rand turned with quick, military precision and walked swiftly out of the room.

CHAPTER II

DICK PLAYS THE PART OF A SPY

THE two men who entered the trading room within a few minutes after Corporal Rand's sudden exit were undoubtedly half-breeds. Both were heavy, powerful-looking specimens of the lowest type of humanity to be found in the North. Their appearance was far from prepossessing. They shambled over to the counter, elbowed their way through the small group of customers and stood for a moment watching Factor MacClaren wrapping up merchandise purchased by the various members of the chattering party.

Behind the pages of his magazine, Dick covertly watched them. Thus far, they had made no effort to approach or accost Nichols, whose indolent form slouched on one of the high stools, which had been placed before the counter. To all appearances, the two newcomers were entirely oblivious of the presence, or even the existence of the big prospector. Not once had their dark, insolent glances been turned in his direction.

But—and here was a curious thing—each passing

moment seemed to bring them closer and closer to the man under police surveillance. They accomplished this maneuver in a manner that would have done credit to an experienced horseman, jockeying for position at the commencement of a race. Almost imperceptibly, and by degrees, they had edged nearer, covering the short space separating them from the imperturbable Nichols without once creating the impression that the thing had been done intentionally.

They were so close now that Nichols might easily have reached out with one long arm and placed it on the shoulder of either one of them. The prospector's eyes were upon Factor MacClaren and his face was perfectly mobile and expressionless. If he was aware of the proximity of the murderous looking pair, he gave no sign of it. He moved slightly in his chair but completely ignored them. Dick had about come to the conclusion that the two half-breeds were not those whom Corporal Rand had expected, when a very suspicious movement on the part of Murky caught his alert gaze. With a lazy, seemingly unconscious action, the prospector's hand was thrust in a pocket, held there for a moment, then was drawn forth, palm down and thrust quickly towards the nearer of the two stalky forms. Swift as the movement had been, Dick had, nevertheless, caught a glimpse of the roll of bills so secretly exchanged.

The half-breeds lingered for a very short time near their benefactor, then advanced along the counter and purchased several plugs of smoking tobacco from Factor MacClaren. Completing this transaction, they turned nonchalantly and walked out. No sooner had the door closed after them, than Murky rose and sauntered over to the window. He was still gazing out when the door creaked again and Corporal Rand entered.

"I've been out inspecting MacClaren's new warehouse," he announced cheerfully. "You must be expecting a large volume of business this winter." He addressed the factor.

Walter MacClaren put down a large bundle of merchandise and paused to wipe his perspiring face.

"Yes," he answered, "trading is good this year. Just now the indications are especially bright. Although this is just the beginning of the fur season, I've never seen better prices or the promise of so large a trade."

"Indian trappers are out everywhere," Corporal Rand remarked. "Yesterday I ran into a party of them going out to the Big Smoky. They told me they expected a good catch this year."

MacClaren nodded as he went back to his work. The mounted policeman moved over to the table where Dick sat and placed a friendly hand on that young man's shoulder.

"If I can pry you loose from that magazine," he

declared jovially, "I'm going to ask you to step up to my room for a few minutes for a private consultation. No! Don't look frightened. I really don't intend to take you into custody just yet. If you'll bring your cribbage board and a new deck of cards, I'll promise to be lenient."

Grinning, Dick got to his feet. Well he knew that the game he and the corporal would presently play had nothing whatever to do with cribbage. Something a great deal more important was at stake just then—he could tell that from the serious, thoughtful expression so poorly concealed under Rand's effort at deception. The jovial manner, the subterfuge of the cribbage board and the forced laugh—all were intended for the eyes and ears of the man who still stood near the window, and whose suspicions, under any circumstances, must not be aroused.

With a quickening pulse, Dick followed the policeman through the door at the back of the trading room, down a long hallway and into an immaculately neat and clean-looking chamber, which MacClaren always reserved for the use of various members of the R. N. W. M. P. who came frequently to the post.

Rand motioned his visitor to a chair.

"Well, what did you find out?"

"Nichols handed a roll of bills to two half-breeds who entered the room shortly after your departure," Dick replied quickly.

"Did you happen to overhear any of their conversation?" came the next question.

"They didn't talk," the other informed him. "The breeds moved close to Nichols, but pretended to be interested in the customers and the trading. Until he put his hand in his pocket and passed the money quickly over to one of the half-breeds, you never would have known that Murky realized that the two were standing there."

"Then what happened?"

"Nothing. At least nothing of importance. The pair bought some tobacco and walked out. Nichols went to the window and seemed to be watching them as they hurried away. You came in yourself a moment later."

"Thanks, Dick, you've done well," approved the corporal. "You've helped me to weld the first link in the chain. In time, I hope to piece together the other links that will lead me to the solution of this mystery."

Dick's curiosity was aroused, but hesitated about asking any questions. To what mystery did Rand refer? He waited patiently for the policeman's next words:

"In fairness to you, Dick, I think it's advisable to give you some information regarding this case. I've already hinted to you that Murky Nichols is under police surveillance. We've been watching him closely for a long time. His movements have been

suspicious. Although he professes to be a prospector, he really hasn't done a tap of work in the last four years. He always has a large amount of money and he spends it liberally."

"Where does he get this money?" Dick inquired.

"From three or four different sources. To my certain knowledge, there are two men who pay him money regularly. One is Fred Hart and the other is Tim O'Connell. Both of these men are packers in the summer and freighters in the winter. They have almost a monopoly on the transportation business in this particular section of the country. The Hudson's Bay, in addition to several of the independent fur companies and free traders, give practically all of their business to these men. Last year Factor MacClaren's business alone amounted to nearly five thousand dollars. Hart and O'Connell get the preference over the other packers and freighters because they are more efficient, careful and responsible."

"Why," said Dick, as the thought suddenly occurred to him, "perhaps Nichols is a silent-partner in their enterprise."

Rand smiled at the other's quick perception, but he slowly shook his head.

"That's the conclusion we came to ourselves. Investigation, carried out secretly, proves that he isn't. No—the thing goes deeper than that. Nichols is

engaged in some secret and probably illegal enterprise. Little by little we've been picking up new clues—making new discoveries. We've found nothing incriminating yet, but I don't believe it will be very long before we will."

"What about the money that exchanged hands today? What business dealing do you suppose Nichols could have with those two hard-looking customers?"

"Both of them are thieves, but we haven't yet been able to prove anything against them. For several weeks past we've suspected that either they're in Murky's employ or that the breeds come to him to sell stolen goods. The fact that Nichols paid them money today is a pretty strong indication that one or other of these suppositions is correct."

Corporal Rand paused to fill his pipe.

"Nichols is shrewd and clever," he went on. "He's amiable and well-liked. He has many friends in every part of the country. Notwithstanding, there's a deep, treacherous side to his nature, a diabolical cleverness that can find its outlet only through criminal channels. Your friend, Sergeant Richardson, believes firmly he's a master crook, a sort of genius at crime, and that he contrives to distract attention from himself by assuming this role of genial, lazy, ignorant prospector."

Dick laughed outright.

"Sergeant Richardson has a vivid imagination," he declared, "but very often in cases of this kind his deductions prove correct."

"True enough!" Constable Rand puffed reflectively. "He's worked out a very unusual theory in regard to Nichols. It was shortly after the finding of old Daddy McInnes' body that he told me about it. The whole thing is so extraordinary, so wild, and yet so convincing that we've decided to look into it. It's this theory that we're working on now."

"Won't you tell me about it?" pleaded Dick.

"Certainly. There's no harm done, that I can see. Besides the sergeant informed me that I could trust you implicitly. He even hinted that you contemplated joining the force. What about that?"

"It's true," Dick was forced to admit, his face red with embarrassment. "I've made application to the commissioner at Ottawa, but I'm not sure that anything will ever come of it."

"I'm not so certain," Rand shook his head. "We need more men, especially here in the North. You'd have to spend a period of training at Regina though.

"But to go on with Richardson's theory," resumed the corporal. "Incredible as it may at first appear, it's logical enough. I'll give you its substance briefly: Nichols is the leader of a small band of crooks. Hart and O'Connell are his accomplices, or, what I should say his accessories—they're both hon-

est. Nichols never actually commits any crime himself. He purchases fur, which he knows is stolen and disposes of it."

"Through Hart and O'Connell, I suppose," Dick put in. "They take it to civilization and sell it."

"No. You're a thousand miles from the mark. Hart and O'Connell play a less important part in this scheme. Murky is more clever than that. He disposes of his own stuff in a more original and unheard-of way. Hart and O'Connell merely supply him with means of transportation—pack horses in summer and dog teams in winter."

Corporal Rand paused again and rose to his feet. He tiptoed softly to the door, opened it and looked out.

"I thought there might be someone in the hallway," he apologised. "One can't be too careful."

He closed the door, a slight frown on his face, and went back to the chair opposite Dick.

"I guess we won't be bothered. Where was I—oh, yes—As I just said Hart and O'Connell supply Nichols with ponies or dog teams, depending upon the season, and Murky proceeds to transport his stolen fur to the coast."

"To the coast!" gasped Dick. "How could he?"

"Through Blind Man's Pass."

Dick sat and stared incredulously at the grave, serious face of the man opposite.

"You're fooling me, corporal."

"Not a bit! Richardson feels that he's absolutely sure that such is the case. I'm almost convinced myself. Every clue that we've been able to pick up since the Sergeant hit upon this wild theory seems to bear him out. Another thing, there's the case of Daddy McInnes. The story I told in the trading room an hour ago was an elaboration of or a tampering with the true facts."

"I don't think I quite understand."

"Daddy McInnes was murdered. A blow on the back of the head."

Dick shivered.

"Naturally, we don't want anyone to suspect—least of all Nichols—that we know McInnes came to a violent end. That would spoil everything. We never would catch Murky if a breath of this ever leaked out. The abrasion on the back of Daddy's head caused a little comment, but we took immediate steps to check it."

"How?" asked Dick.

"We claimed that in his weakened and starved condition, McInnes fainted and fell, his head striking a rock. Everyone believes it now."

"But why should Nichols—I mean, what motive would he have?"

"Daddy found the pass and came through it. If he had lived, its exact location would have become public property. In that event, Murky Nichols would have been out of a job."

"But what about Hart and O'Connell? They must know where Blind Man's Pass is."

"No, I don't think so. There is only one white man in this country who could lead us unerringly to Blind Man's Pass—and that person is Murky Nichols!"

CHAPTER III

SERGEANT RICHARDSON'S THEORY

For the second time since coming to the room, Corporal Rand strode to the door and opened it.

"I must be nervous today," he declared. "I pop up here every few minutes like a jack-in-the-box. Somehow, I can't get over the feeling that there was really someone prowling about the hallway a short time ago."

"I didn't hear anything," reassured Dick.

"Possibly I am mistaken. There are times when a thing like that will lay hold of you, and you don't seem to be able to shake it off."

"I've often experienced the same feeling," confessed Dick. "It isn't very pleasant."

Closing the door, the mounted policeman helped himself to a glass of water from a pitcher that stood on the table.

"I've given you a brief outline of Richardson's theory," he stated, "but I'm afraid I haven't made everything quite clear. Are there any questions you'd like to ask?"

"Yes—about Hart and O'Connell," Dick re-

sponded quickly. "According to what you have said, these men have given Nichols money. After listening to your story, that part of it doesn't seem reasonable. If Murky uses their outfits to transport stolen goods to the coast through Blind Man's Pass, I should think he'd be under obligation to them, that he'd pay them money instead of their paying him."

"So it would seem," Corporal Rand smiled approvingly. "That was my contention. I claimed it was the one weak spot in Richardson's theory—but, of course, the explanation is simple enough.

"Hart and O'Connell's are freighters. They go everywhere. They have almost a monopoly on the transportation business. They have the government mail contract from here to Edmonton. Occasionally, perhaps not more than once or twice a year, they have business that takes them to the west coast —across Dominion Range. As you know this is a long and roundabout trip, requiring weeks, sometimes months for its completion. Consequently the transportation rates to the west coast are high. No one realizes this condition of affairs any better than Nichols. He takes advantage of it for his own gain. He draws up an agreement with the two packers to handle all the west-coast business himself, charging a very nominal rate for this service, and killing two birds with one stone. You can see how diabolical, how very clever the arrangement is. The

freight that goes through Blind Man's Pass is a mixed shipment. Part of it is stolen fur, the other part is merchandise which the original shipper has entrusted to the care of Hart or O'Connell.

"The scheme works beautifully," smiled Rand. "Both parties to the transaction reap a lovely profit. Hart or O'Connell charge the shipper the same price that he would have to pay if his merchandise went all the way round to the west coast through the Yellowhead Pass. Murky can smile up his sleeve too, because all expense of taking out his contraband falls upon the willing shoulders of the two packers."

"I never heard of anything so clever," declared Dick. "Of course, Hart and O'Connell are aware of the existence of Blind Man's Pass. You don't suppose they know where it is themselves?"

"No, that's Murky's own secret. Otherwise the packers would never have entered into such an agreement."

"I can see it all very clearly now," said Dick, "and I'm anxious to know in what way I can be of help."

Corporal Rand hesitated for a moment before making a reply. He sat in the chair opposite and regarded Dick with appraising eyes.

"We haven't definitely decided just what we are going to do ourselves, but we intend to use you in some capacity. I'm waiting now to hear from Sergeant Richardson. However, unless something unforseen occurs, I imagine our program will be some-

thing like this: Malemute Slade will continue in his search for the pass; Constable Pearly—a new man just recently transferred here from the Peace River Detachment—will be detailed to keep close tab on Hart and O'Connell, while Sergeant Richardson and myself will study every movement of the two half-breeds and Murky.

"It may take weeks, possibly months, before we'll be able to accomplish much. We are compelled to move very, very cautionsly. If Nichols discovers our interest in his affairs, we'll lose our only chance of getting him. He's as slippery as an eel, and as crafty as a fox. I don't believe there is another person in the North with a wider acquaintance, or a more thorough knowledge of conditions."

"But wouldn't Hart and O'Connell squeal if Murky should refuse to take any more of their shipments through Blind Man's Pass?"

"In the first place they won't dare to, because the shippers will hear of it and refuse to give the packers another dollar's worth of business. Remember Hart and O'Connell have been reaping a golden harvest at the shippers' expense. In the second place, even if they do squeal, we'll have no direct evidence against Nichols."

"How then do you propose to catch Murky?"

"There are several ways: One would be to find the pass ourselves and then wait for Murky to come through; another would be to follow a west-coast

shipment from the time it leaves the hands of Hart and O'Connell; still another, to locate Murky's cache of stolen fur, and awaiting the next shipment through Blind Man's Pass."

"You really think Murky has such a cache?"

"If our theory is correct, he must have. In all likelihood, he has two of them."

"Two of them!" gasped Dick. "What makes you think that?"

"It stands to reason that he has. In fact, it's quite obvious. The stolen fur must be stored somewhere before it is shipped. When it reaches the coast, it must be stored again."

"Why not sold?"

"There's only one place to sell it—at the Hudson's Bay Company's post at Fort Pennington—and Murky isn't foolish enough to take that risk."

"You mean," asked Dick in amazement, "that he'd continue to—that he's been hiding it out there on the coast year after year, making no attempt to sell it?"

"Yes and no! We believe he hides it out there all right. But we're pretty sure that he sells some of it occasionally. We do know that two years ago last summer he went to Seattle. He was away about six months. When he returned he was rolling in money and told a very interesting story about a legacy he had received from a brother, recently deceased. We believed the yarn then—but we don't

now! In fact," Rand spoke sarcastically, "we're somewhat inclined to the opinion that while he was there he met one or two unscrupulous gentlemen who offered to accompany him up the coast for the fun and profit to be derived."

"I shouldn't wonder," laughed Dick.

"He probably hasn't sold any of the fur since then. I think that when you go out there, you'll find that Richardson's theory is correct. There'll be a big cache—"

"When *I* go out there?" interrupted Dick, staring in astonishment at the policeman.

"Yes—you, Sandy and Toma. Surely, you'd be willing to do that much for us, Dick. Sergeant Richardson said that you'd jump at the chance."

"But—but—"

"We're so sure that you'll find the cache, that we're willing to pay all the expenses of the trip—and a liberal reward in the bargain. What do you say?"

"Say!" choked Dick. "I can't say enough. What I want to know is—do you really mean it?"

"I was never more serious in my life."

Dick rose to his feet and paced agitatedly back and forth. His heart had jumped a few wild beats before he could compose himself sufficiently to make another effort to speak.

"When do you want us to start?" he asked.

"As soon as it can possibly be arranged. Toma

knows the route to the Yellowhead Pass; but after that you'll have to chart your own course. We can depend on you then?"

"So far as I'm concerned—yes. I won't presume to speak for Sandy and Toma, yet I'm pretty sure they'll go."

A few minutes later, Corporal Rand and Dick returned to the trading room, which was crowded. Stalwart, dusky half-breed trappers, eager to purchase supplies for impending excursions to favorite trapping grounds, pushed and elbowed their way through the throng awaiting their opportunity to confer with Factor MacClaren. Indian women, resplendent in bright shawls, bright-faced children from the Catholic Mission, here and there the dark, expressionless face and sinewy form of Cree hunters and rivermen from the south—all of this queer blend of humanity jostled forth and back, chattering excitedly.

At one side of the room, surrounded by an admiring group, a tall, lanky half-breed youth was playing a violin. Glancing that way, Dick's eyes lighted up as he perceived the familiar figures of his two friends, Sandy MacClaren, the factor's nephew, and John Toma, the young Indian guide.

Toma, Sandy and Dick, following several years of interesting adventures in the North, had become greatly attached to each other. They were three inseparables, who had learned to take the trials and

hardships of wilderness life as a matter of common experience. In spite of many hard knocks, they were still as eager to embark upon new adventures as in the days when Dick and Sandy were newcomers to that remote and inhospitable land.

Dick lost no time in rejoining his two chums. With a friendly nod to Corporal Rand, he darted through the crowd and administered a resounding whack on the backs of Sandy and Toma.

"Well, you've returned at last," he greeted them joyfully. "Did you have any luck?"

Sandy turned eagerly.

"You bet! We shot two moose," and the young Scotchman immediately commenced a somewhat rambling and disconnected account of their experiences.

At its conclusion, Dick feigned scepticism, winked broadly at Toma.

"Pah! The whole thing sounds fishy to me. I don't believe you shot anything. If you actually killed a moose it was because the poor thing fell down and broke a leg. At two hundred yards a blind man with a bow and arrow could out-shoot you."

"All right, wait and see. An Indian packer is bringing over our two moose tomorrow."

"How much did you pay him for them?"

In attempting to evade Sandy's friendly upper-cut, Dick stepped back just in time to be knocked flat by

a person hurrying across the room. From his position on the floor, he looked up to see the man spring to the door, open it, and dart outside.

It was the half-breed, who had received the roll of money from Murky Nichols!

CHAPTER IV

TWO ENCOUNTERS IN ONE DAY

An excited shout from Sandy drew Dick's attention as he clambered to his feet. At the opposite end of the trading room a gesticulating, wildly vociferous crowd had gathered about the drooping figure of Murky Nichols. The face of the prospector was deathly pale, as he stood, one hand clutching the counter, the other gripping firmly a long-bladed hunting knife, which he held up for the inspection of the crowd.

The scarlet-coated form of Corporal Rand advanced through the milling throng and a moment later, just as the three boys came hurrying up, the policeman helped Nichols to a chair.

"What happened, Murky?" he demanded.

"Some breed tried to knife me," choked the frightened man, holding on to the chair for support.

"Who was it?"

"I don't know," wheezed Murky. "Never seen him before. He came up while I was a standin' over there an' first thing I knowed he made a slash at me."

Nichols trembled as he spoke, drawing attention to the wide slit in his mackinaw shirt just below his left arm-pit.

"This is where the knife caught me when I jumped back. Good thing I did or he'd o' got me sure."

"Did he hurt you at all?" inquired Rand.

"Nothing but a scratch."

"You were lucky. You say you didn't know the breed?"

A slight hesitation on the part of the prospector was noted probably by only two persons in the room —Dick and Corporal Rand.

"First time I ever set eyes on him, corporal."

"Did he speak to you or did you speak to him before he drew the knife?"

"No," Murky stated emphatically.

"Very queer the man should attack you without provocation," mused Rand. "You're absolutely sure you never saw him before?"

A slow flush mounted to Nichols' weather-tanned brow and for a split-second his eyes evaded the questioner.

"Hang it, corporal," he spoke testily, "ain't I been tellin' yuh. Don't even know what he looks like—it all happened so sudden. If he should come walkin' in here in ten minutes from now I ain't so sure I'd recognize him. The feller must be crazy."

"It certainly looks queer!" Rand's cool, unwaver-

ing gaze met that of the prospector. "Usually there's a motive for an attack of this kind. As a general thing, a man doesn't attempt to stab another unless he has some real or fancied grievance."

"He's crazy, I tell yuh," persisted Nichols.

Rand turned away.

"I'll see what I can do. I intend to take the breed in custody. I ought to be able to run him down in a few hours. Then we can question him."

The corporal turned without a moment's hesitation and hurried away. He was gone almost before Dick could collect his scattered wits and remark to Sandy:

"There! I intended to tell him something, but it's too late now."

"You might be able to catch him at the stable," said the quick-witted Sandy, seizing Dick's arm. "Come on!"

The three boys pushed their way through the crowd, but a jam in front of the door delayed them. Like themselves, everyone, so it seemed, wanted to get out. They were caught in a drifting, struggling current of over-curious half-breeds, were jolted back and forth and, when they finally emerged, panting and dishevelled, to the yard outside, they perceived to their chagrin that Rand had already mounted his horse and was speeding away.

"Just my luck!" Dick sputtered. "There he goes.

I might have given him information that would have saved him a lot of time."

"What information?" demanded a person almost at his elbow.

Neither Sandy nor Toma had spoken. Dick wheeled quickly and looked up into a pair of steel-gray eyes, at a coarse, brutal face. The man's rough garb was that of a prospector or trapper. None of the boys had ever seen him before.

"What information?" he repeated insolently.

Dick met the other's appraising gaze without flinching.

"I wasn't speaking to you, sir."

"That's all right, I'm speaking to yuh. I asked yuh what I consider is a decent, friendly question. Yuh don't need to try any o' your high an' haughty manner with me."

Dick completely ignored the insult, despite the fact that it was difficult to suppress the surge of anger that rose within him. He was fighting mad and his fists clenched involuntarily, yet he turned to Sandy and contrived, though the effort was difficult, to speak calmly:

"Let's walk down along the river."

Sandy's face fell as he swung into step beside his friend, his right arm linked into Toma's. As they struck off to the left, they were followed by the baleful, mocking glare of Dick's newly discovered enemy.

Out of ear-shot, Sandy broke forth:

"Dick, I'm almost ashamed of you. Why did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Walk away like that. It looks cowardly. I never saw you do a thing like that before."

"I don't know why I did it," Dick confessed, "except that I had a hunch that if I let him pick a fight with me, I'd—I'd—well, I can't explain it. Something seemed to warn me to keep away from him."

"You mean, you were afraid of him."

"No, not that!" Dick retorted hotly. "I'd like to go back even now and 'mix-it' with him."

"Why don't you?"

"I've tried to explain to you, Sandy. I have a feeling that it would be foolhardy. Something more than a mere quarrel or a fight is involved. That man, whoever he is, had some secret purpose in view when he accosted me just now. I don't know what that purpose is, but I do know I'm not going to take any chances."

For a few moments they walked on in silence.

"I can forget about it if you can," remarked Sandy a little dryly.

Dick laughed good-naturedly.

"I don't think I'll have any trouble doing that," he responded quickly. "There's too much else to think about. And that reminds me that I have some big news for you and Toma. How would you

like to take a trip out to the coast this winter?"

Sandy stopped short in his tracks.

"To the coast!" he exclaimed. "What do you mean?"

"Exactly that. Corporal Rand told me about it today. He brought a letter from our old friend, Sergeant Richardson."

Without further preliminary, Dick launched into the story. Toma and Sandy listened with bated breath while Dick gave them the particulars of the theory which had been advanced by the mounted police respecting the alleged operations of Murky Nichols. Blind Man's Pass, the murder of Daddy McInnes, the double cache of stolen fur and finally the proposed expedition to the west coast to be undertaken by the boys themselves—all became subjects of absorbing interest and speculation.

"As I understand it," Sandy broke forth enthusiastically, "Sergeant Richardson is sending us out to the coast because he believes we can find the cache."

"Yes," answered Dick. "It's an important undertaking, and we ought to be proud that the police have faith in our ability. Of course, we would never have been given the chance if Inspector Cameron wasn't so short of men."

"We make 'em mounted police glad they give us chance to go," cut in Toma. "If cache anywhere along coast, we find it."

"We certainly will," said Sandy.

Walking leisurely along the banks of the river, the boys made their plans. So interested had they become, so absorbed in the contemplation of the proposed journey, that they found themselves presently out of sight of the trading post. They were crossing a narrow gulch, when Dick stopped short, glancing about him.

"No use going any farther," he declared laughingly. "Let's return to the post."

Sandy took note of their surroundings and he too broke forth into an amused chuckle.

"Can you beat that!" he exclaimed. "We've been sauntering along not paying the least bit of attention. I had no idea we'd gone so far. We're five miles from Fort Good Faith. A hundred yards on the other side of this gulch is where Run River trail crosses the river."

As Sandy spoke, he turned back and led the way to the top of the gulch. Spruce and poplar grew thickly along the trail ahead. A light snow of a few days before, sifting down through the trees, had only partially covered the heavy carpet of dry leaves and grass.

"It will be several weeks yet before winter sets in in earnest," observed Dick. "I hope the mounted police give us instructions to leave for the west coast before it does come. If we travel light, we'll reach the Yellowhead Pass long before the extremely cold weather arrives."

"Not snow enough," Toma shook his head disapprovingly. "No use start out until catch 'em plenty snow for dog team. Mebbe no get snow for five, six days yet."

"Nonsense!" Sandy looked up at the overcast sky with a critical but approving gaze. "It's cloudy right now. I wouldn't be surprised if it started to snow this afternoon."

"Too warm," Toma objected. "Wind blow southwest. Tomorrow chinook make like summer. Mebbe it rain, but no snow."

"You might as well keep quiet, Sandy," grinned Dick. "Toma is a better weather prophet than you are. He's seldom wrong."

"Just the same, I think there's a storm brewing," stubbornly persisted the young Scotchman. "This is the second week in October. Last year at this time there was seven inches of snow on the ground and the weather was ten below zero."

"Don't worry about it. I look at it this way: if the police are ready, we'll be ready too. Let the chinook come. We'll start out on foot and buy our grub-stake and dog team at Fort Wonderly, one hundred miles south of here."

"Good idea! You're talking sense now, Dick. Well—for the love of Pete!"

Sandy's abrupt exclamation was caused by the sudden appearance on the trail ahead of four men. One of them they recognized instantly. It was the

person who had attempted to pick a quarrel with Dick. Startled for a moment, the boys drew back to the side of the trail.

"Don't say a word," cautioned Dick in a low voice. "If they attempt to start trouble, try to keep away from them. We're no match for them. Besides, they're armed and we aren't."

Pretending a nonchalance they did not feel, the three boys strode forward again until they came abreast of the oncoming and ominous quartette. In the lead, Dick edged over to the side of the trail, hoping that no attempt would be made to prevent their passing. He was now within three feet of the nearest of the party, and had almost begun to believe that nothing would happen, when the four men spread out quickly, completely barring their progress. Dick looked across at two gray eyes that glinted evilly.

"Guess yuh better stop a while, sonny," sneered the voice of the white man. "Feel like answerin' that question now?"

"I haven't any question to answer," retorted Dick, looking straight at his tormentor, and then at the three half-breeds, a villainous-appearing trio, who stood ready and eager to leap forward at the first word of command.

The white man stepped forward and confronted Dick, one arm raised threateningly.

"Yuh better do some quick thinkin' afore I whale

the tar outta yuh. Are yuh gonna answer that question or not?"

In the short interval in which he stood there undecided, a daring plan leaped into Dick's mind. He would feign submission. He would agree to answer the question. Then when the time came—

"All—all right," stammered Dick, simulating terror. "Wh-what do you want?"

"Yuh know blamed well what I want. Back there at the post 'bout an hour er two ago, you wuz figgerin' on givin' that danged mountie a whole earful o' information. I heerd yuh tellin' these young friends o' yourn. Out with it!"

The arm was raised again and Dick shrank back, his eyes blinking.

"Don't strike me and I'll tell you," he trembled. "I'll tell everything. I promise I will."

Dick's antagonist chuckled in triumph. It tickled his vanity to perceive how easily he was winning his case. He had his victim almost frightened out of his wits. This young stripling who stood before him hadn't the backbone of an eel. His arm dropped and he slouched forward, completely off guard, and leered into Dick's face.

It was the opportunity that Dick had been looking for. Crack! The blow was a smashing one and wholly unexpected. The white man's feet skidded out from under him; his heavy frame struck the ground with a resounding impact. Before the half-

breeds had time to recover from their astonishment, three fleeting forms shot through the opening and took the turn in the trail, running at top speed.

A few moments later a bullet whizzed harmlessly over their heads. The boys redoubled their efforts. A second turn in the trail revealed a straggling party of Indians returning from the post. At sight of them, Sandy let out a whoop of joy. Help was at hand. The danger was over. Panting like three small locomotives, they sat down on a log and waved a cheerful greeting as the Indians passed by.

When the last straggler had disappeared from view, Sandy turned and smiled at his chum. There was approval and admiration in his eyes.

"Step over here and let me shake your hand. Wow! I'll bet that fellow is still wondering if it was really a tree that struck him. I'll give you all the credit this time, Dick. There's no denying the fact: You certainly answered his question!"

CHAPTER V

A MIDNIGHT CONFERENCE

Corporal Rand returned with his half-breed prisoner shortly after dark. The man was sulky and refused to talk. Brought before Murky Nichols by the mounted policeman, one might have thought from his actions and demeanor that he had never before set eyes upon the prospector. He stood absolutely unmoved in the presence of the person he had attempted to murder only a few hours before. Rand's voice rang out sharply:

"Here is the prisoner. Is he the man who attempted to stab you?"

In order to cover his confusion, Nichols rubbed his eyes with one large hairy hand. His face was slightly pale and he rested his weight first on one leg and then on the other.

"Well, corporal, I can't exactly say," he spoke hesitatingly. "He might be the one an' again he mightn't. He does look sort o' familiar, but I see so many Nitchies 'round here. I couldn't exactly swear to it."

Corporal Rand smiled a little grimly.

"There were quite a number of people present

in this room when the attempt upon your life was made. It shouldn't be very difficult to find out whether or not this man is the right one."

Nichols started forward with an exclamation of surprise. He was staring at the prisoner now with an intentness that seemed scarcely to be assumed. Excitedly, he turned towards Rand.

"By golly, I know now, corporal, where I seen him before," he declared in a loud and animated voice. "Up at the first portage on the Moose River. He was workin' there as a packer last summer when I come through. I don't think he's the man we're looking fer atall."

The mounted policeman turned his head ever so slightly and winked covertly at Dick, who, in company with Sandy and Toma, stood a few feet away, silent spectator in the interesting tableau.

"You really don't think he's the man, then?"

"No, he ain't," Murky spoke positively. "When I stop to think about that little affair this afternoon, an' try to get a picture in my mind o' the pesky breed what made fer to knife me, there's one thing that stands out. He was a tall man—not short like this breed. I'm tall myself, an' I remember when I jumped back to clear myself o' the knife, I looked straight acrost in his eyes. Now, it stands to reason, corporal, that I couldn't o' done that if it had o' been this feller here. I'd o' looked straight over this man's head, now wouldn't I?"

With difficulty, Dick suppressed a laugh. Murky Nichols was noted for his tall stature. Long and lanky, he stood well over six feet and four inches in height. The half-breed was stockily built and inclined to be short. The top of his head reached no higher than the point of Murky's protruding chin.

"Now that your memory has revived," Corporal Rand spoke sarcastically, "we may be able to make better progress."

Dick strode forward with the intention of drawing the mounted policeman's attention to one detail of the case that had evidently been overlooked. If the half-breed, who confronted Nichols, was not the person who had attempted to stab him, how would it be possible to explain that person's hasty exit from the trading room immediately following the attack? Also, as Dick was well aware, the prisoner was the same man who had received the roll of bills from Murky earlier in the day.

Dick paused in amazement. Before he could reach the policeman's side, he saw Rand stoop forward and commence to unlock the prisoner's handcuffs. Then, wonderingly, he watched the corporal move back and permit the astonished half-breed to go free. His voice broke the startled silence of the room:

"You're at liberty to go now."

"Sorry to cause yuh all this trouble," Nichols apologised. "But you're doing the right thing, cor-

poral. He ain't the man what tried to knife me."

The policeman favored Murky with one swift appraising glance, nodded absently and walked over and took Dick's arm. Although he did not speak, the light pressure of the corporal's fingers told Dick that the policeman wished to see him. With a mumbled apology to Sandy, Dick led the way to his own room. When he had drawn up a chair for his guest, he came immediately to the subject uppermost in his mind.

"I can't understand—" he began.

The policeman held up one hand in an impatient gesture.

"You're about to tell me that I have made a very serious blunder, aren't you, Dick?"

"We-well," stammered that young man, "you can hardly blame me, corporal. The man you just released is guilty. I didn't see him when he attempted to stab Murky, but I did see him when he escaped. In spite of what Nichols told you, he did recognize the breed. Murky lied. He's the same one who received the roll of bills."

Corporal Rand grinned as he looked across at Dick's puzzled, serious face.

"I'm well aware of that," he said calmly. "I too am sure that the half-breed was Murky's assailant. But I had a good reason for releasing him."

"If you don't mind my asking, what reason?"

For a moment Rand did not reply. Apparently,

he had become absorbed in his own thoughts. He had relaxed in his chair, his head bent forward, his eyes studying the tips of his brightly polished boots.

"Ever since I captured the half-breed this afternoon," he spoke finally, "I have been thinking that very little is to be gained by holding him in custody. Nichols will not prefer a charge against him because he's afraid the fellow may squeal. The half-breed himself, realizing the danger of his position, and who is really more clever than I had at first supposed, is attempting to save himself by keeping silent. Even if we subjected him to a severe grilling, I doubt very much whether we could get anything out of him. It seems to me that the best way to deal with the situation is to accept Murky's assertion that we have captured the wrong man."

"But I should think that by letting the half-breed go, you'd lose a chance to find out in what way Murky and the breed are associated."

"No, I don't think so," replied the corporal. "On the contrary, I'm quite sure we can find out more now that I have set the half-breed free. I'm playing right into Murky's hands. He's laughing up his sleeve at this very moment at the way he thinks he's fooled the mounted police. He'll be inclined to be a little careless. We can look for immediate developments."

"What developments?" asked Dick.

"Murky's first move will be to attempt to patch

up his differences with his former assailant. The half-breed's motive for attacking Nichols can easily be explained—money! No doubt, Murky had failed to live up to an agreement."

The policeman paused to fill his pipe.

"By watching the two of them, we will be pretty sure to find out something," he continued. "If I'm not badly mistaken, we will be able to secure evidence against them within the next two or three days. I intend to keep a close tab on the pair from now on."

Dick stirred uneasily in his seat. There was a question he wanted to ask, but he did not wish to appear too eager. During a lull in the conversation, however, he finally managed to pluck up sufficient courage.

"When would you like to have us start for the west coast?" he inquired.

"Have you seen Sandy and Toma?"

"Yes."

"What did they say?"

"They're as eager to go as I am," replied Dick.

Corporal Rand drummed on the arm of his chair.

"I can see no reason why you shouldn't start right away," he declared. "The only difficulty is that you will be compelled to take supplies for the trip, and just now pack-horses would be inadvisable. A dog team would be better, but there's no snow."

"We were talking about that," Dick put in eagerly.

"Why couldn't we travel on foot to Fort Wonderly and buy our team and supplies there?"

"A capital idea!" approved Rand.

"Can we start in the morning?" Dick asked impetuously.

"Yes."

Dick jumped up, his eyes shining, and strode forward and grasped the corporal's hand.

"Sandy and Toma will be tickled pink!" he cried enthusiastically.

"And what about yourself?" smiled Rand.

Dick flushed to the roots of his hair. He grinned sheepishly.

"Why—why, I'm pleased, of course. Who wouldn't be with a chance like that. I can hardly wait until we start, corporal."

He grew suddenly more serious.

"Have you any further instructions to give us before we go?"

Corporal Rand shook his head.

"There is nothing except what I have already told you," he replied. "You know the route. There are any number of trails leading south to the Yellowhead Pass. After you have gone through the pass and have turned north, you'll find only one trail, very rough and difficult, which will take you in a northwesterly direction to Fort Pennington. From there your course will be straight west to the Pacific."

"And there—on the coast, I mean—our real work will commence," Dick smiled in anticipation.

Corporal Rand regarded the statement with approval.

"*Work* is the right name for it," he assured him. "I haven't the least doubt but that you'll all become discouraged long before you find the cache. In fact, you may never find it. You'll encounter dangers and difficulties on every hand."

"Do you think the cache will be guarded?" asked Dick.

"Almost sure to be," Rand replied. "Probably by some Indian or half-breed. You'll be compelled to move cautiously. If I were you, I wouldn't take too many chances. No telling what sort of a mess you'll get in, if you aren't incessantly on the alert."

Dick would have liked to ask the policeman a few more questions, but decided not to as he observed the other sleepily consulting his watch. The hour was getting late. The sounds from the trading room, which a short time before could be heard faintly, had now entirely ceased. The place had become enveloped in a deep and slumberous silence.

Corporal Rand suppressed a yawn, rose slowly to his feet.

"It's time we were both in bed," he announced. "If either one of us expects to get anything accomplished tomorrow, it will be necessary to secure some sleep. I've had a rather hard day myself."

With a friendly nod and a smile, he turned and walked out of the room. Dick stood in the doorway and watched him for a moment, a happy expression on his face. Rand's figure continued down the hallway. A few feet farther on was the corporal's room. Dick stepped back to re-enter his own chamber, when, to his surprise, he perceived that the policeman did not even pause in front of his own door, but went on instead to the end of the hallway and immediately disappeared through a door which opened to the yard outside.

"He's gone out to see if his horse is bedded down for the night," thought Dick.

For some reason he could not himself explain, Dick stood in his own doorway, awaiting the corporal's return. The minutes passed by. A quarter of an hour elapsed—and still no sign of the mounted policeman. Growing impatient, Dick commenced pacing back and forth along the hallway. Presently, moved by an unexplained impulse, he dashed into his room, seized his cap and followed in the footsteps of Rand.

It was exceedingly dark outside. A heavy mist moistened his face as he stared through the enveloping gloom. He groped forward until he had found the path that led to the stable, then hurried along it, wondering what had happened to detain the corporal.

Forty or fifty yards from the house he stopped

short in consternation. From his right came the sound of voices. Hesitating for a brief moment, he struck forth again in the direction of the sound, walking on tiptoes, his pulses pounding. Quite unexpectedly, there loomed before him the dark shape of the company's warehouse. It was a large, square building, constructed entirely of logs. Here he came to an abrupt pause and crouched down close to the wall, trembling at his own audacity.

Immediately around the corner from him were two men, talking in guarded tones. Dick listened intently.

"Yuh can do this thing a hull lot better than I can," drawled the voice of Murky Nichols. "Yuh gotta fix it up somehow jes' as soon as yuh possibly can. Tomorrow mornin' ain't none too soon, La Qua, 'cause there ain't no tellin' what that danged breed'll be up to next."

"Yuh mean yuh want me to get him outta the way?"

"If there ain't no other way—yes!" calmly answered Murky. "We can't afford to take no more chances with him. I gotta know he's gonna get right down to business an' no more foolin'. Yuh can tell him we'll give him fifty dollars more fer the next bunch o' pelts he brings down. I won't go a dime higher 'an that an' if he squawks I'm givin' yuh permission to pick him off any time."

"Should o' done that long time ago," growled the

other. "Yuh can't trust him. Yuh ain't the only one he's nearly got with that blamed knife o' his. He nearly killed one o' my best packers less 'an a week ago in a scrap over a card game. I tell yuh, I hate to have him around."

"Jes' the same, he comes in pretty handy," Murky Nichols declared. "Take the case of Daddy McInnes, fer example. None o' yuh fellers would o' dared to do what he done. Both you an' Bremner was in the party guardin' the pass when the ol' man came through."

"I was the first one who seen him," protested the other hotly. "It was me what told this breed, Testola, to go after him."

"Mebbe so, but yuh wouldn't o' done it yourself."

Dick's eyes had widened with understanding and horror. He crouched low, scarcely daring to breathe. A feeling of nausea was followed by a surge of anger and disgust. The two men were vicious and evil—absolutely heartless. At first, he had not recognized the voice of Murky's companion, but a certain quality in the tone, a peculiar inflection, stirred presently his groping memory. It was the voice of the red-bearded man—the person who had attempted to stop him on the trail!

A short silence was broken by Nichols' question:

"When do yuh expect to be ready to send the next shipment?"

"It's about ready now," came the quick answer.

"I was thinkin' o' sendin' it through tomorrow night. If we do, I'm gonna start from the same place I did last time—the little shack near the foot o' Settlement Mountain. We'll have eight pack-horses, belonging' tuh Fred Hart, an' five o' our own."

"Has Hart got much stuff this time?" inquired Murky.

" 'Bout three thousand pounds. The rest o' the shipment belongs to us."

Dick rose cautiously to his feet and commenced to beat a panicky retreat. It would never do to be caught eavesdropping. If he fell into Murky's hands at that moment, his life would be forfeit.

Careful as he was, it seemed to Dick that his footsteps must have been heard plainly. A moment later this feeling became a certainty. There came to his ears a startled, anxious exclamation from one of the men.

"Did yuh hear that?"

"It must have been the wind," reassured the other.

His heart beating wildly, Dick dropped to the ground and wormed his way forward on his hands and knees. A few yards farther on, he sprang to his feet again and bolted away in the direction of the house. Suddenly there appeared immediately ahead the shadowy figure of a man. Dick stopped short in his tracks, shaking in every limb.

His retreat was cut off!

CHAPTER VI

MURKY TAKES A HAND

"Is that you, Dick?"

The voice was Corporal Rand's. Dick's sigh of relief was more like an explosive gasp. He tottered forward a few steps and grasped the sleeve of the policeman's coat, clinging there like a person who had found a friendly haven in the center of a whirlpool. Gradually he recovered his self-possession.

"Did you see them too?" he asked.

"See whom?" demanded the corporal, whispering. "What do you mean? What are you doing out here? I thought I'd left you in bed."

"I'll explain," answered Dick, "but first we'd better go to my room. We're not safe here."

Entering the house a few moments later, they made their way in silence along the hallway and entered Dick's room. Here the light from the oil lamp, which stood on the table, seemed very bright and cheerful to their eyes, which had become accustomed to the intense darkness outside. Rand started forward in surprise.

"Good Heavens, my boy, you're as white as a

ghost! What's happened? What were you doing outside?"

"You were gone so long I followed you," explained Dick. "What detained you?"

"Went out to the stable to look after my horse. I put hay in the manger and then gave him a sheaf of oats. I curried and bedded him down. Of course, it took a little time."

"And you didn't hear voices—"

"No," Rand replied, "I didn't hear anything out-of-the-ordinary until after I had left the stable and heard you running."

"I started out for the stable myself," said Dick, "but in the darkness I took the wrong path, the one toward the warehouse. I heard someone talking and I thought it was you at first, but as I came closer I made out the voices of Murky Nichols and a man named La Qua. I have some startling information to give you, corporal."

"Good boy! What is it, Dick?"

"The outlaws are sending a pack-train through Blind Man's Pass tomorrow night."

Rand became visibly excited. A look of amazement swept over his face, then, to Dick's surprise, he moved forward quickly and blew out the light.

"A light here may arouse their suspicions if they're still outside. We'll sit in the dark for a while. But go on, Dick—I'm interested. What else did you overhear?"

"The pack-train will set out from the vicinity of Settlement Mountain—wherever that is. There's a small cabin there. La Qua said there would be thirteen horses in the train. They're taking through a little freight for Hart, about three thousand pounds. The rest of the stuff belongs to Murky and his confederates."

Corporal Rand whistled softly.

"It's our chance. You're a jewel, Dick! Information like this is what we've been looking for for months," exulted the mounted policeman. "I happen to know where Settlement Mountain is. Thirty miles from here. Between Big Lake and the Settlement House River."

The mounted policeman struck a match in order to consult his watch.

"It's nearly one o'clock now," he declared. "No sleep for me tonight. Your information has upset all my plans, Dick, and yours too. Just as soon as I think the coast is clear, I'm going to steal out, saddle my horse and ride over to see Sergeant Richardson."

"What about our trip to the west coast?" Dick asked. "Wouldn't it be foolish for us to go by way of the Yellowhead Pass now that there's a chance to follow Murky's pack-train and discover the much shorter route through Blind Man's Pass?"

"Yes, it certainly would," agreed the corporal. "That's why I just said that your information has upset all our plans. We must make new ones right

away to fit the circumstances. Also it will be necessary for us to move hurriedly and secretly. Instead of sending you south tomorrow morning—or this morning, to be exact—I'm going to ask the three of you to start as quickly as possible for the Big Lake country, which is almost due west of here. You'd better pick out three fast ponies and head straight for Wandley's post—you know where that is?"

Dick had often heard of Wandley's post, although he had never been there himself. Wandley was a free trader, well known in the North, having for many years conducted a thriving trade with the Indians. His store or trading post was situated a few miles south of Big Lake.

"Yes," said Dick in answer to Rand's question, "I know where it is. I met Wandley himself about a year ago. It's about twenty-five miles over there, and you follow the Settlement House River trail."

"Right!"

Rand stepped closer to Dick and spoke in an undertone:

"Sometime before noon today, Constable Pearly —the new man I told you about—will be at Wandley's. I'll give you a message for him. This message will explain who you are and why I have sent you. The four of you, Constable Pearly, Sandy, Toma and yourself will continue along the Settlement House trail until you come to a bend in the

river. At this point you'll leave the trail, strike straight off through the woods and make camp at the lower end of the bend just above the river. Here you will remain in concealment until Sergeant Richardson and I join you—sometime before dark."

"What will we do then?" Dick asked a little breathlessly.

"That will depend—" the corporal hesitated, "upon circumstances and Sergeant Richardson. He will be in command—not I. But I imagine, at least it is very reasonable to suppose, that we'll start at once for the outlaws' rendezvous, their meeting place near the foot of Settlement Mountain."

"But won't it spoil everything if the outlaws see us?" put in Dick.

"Of course! It's exactly what we don't want to happen. We'll be compelled to move very carefully. Our only chance of finding Blind Man's Pass will be to follow La Qua and his pack-train at a safe distance. We mustn't be seen."

"I suppose you'll arrest La Qua and his men as soon as they get to the pass?"

"Possibly. I think a better plan would be to follow them straight through to the coast—to the big cache they must have there. That is a suggestion I'm going to make to Sergeant Richardson."

Dick's face fell. He was keenly disappointed. The trip to the west coast, the search for the cache of stolen fur, had suddenly, because of this new de-

velopment, gone glimmering. Constable Pearly and Corporal Rand would probably be the ones now chosen for this task. There was too much at stake, the danger attending the task of following the outlaws was too great to permit of any bungling. Here was a job that required older heads and more experience.

"I guess that lets us out," said Dick disconsolately. "Sergeant Richardson wouldn't hear of Sandy, Toma and I going out there alone—following the pack-train, I mean."

Corporal Rand took Dick's arm and gave it a friendly squeeze.

"I'm afraid not. But don't feel badly about it, Dick, we may have other important work for you. If I happen to be the one chosen to trail along after La Qua, I'll speak to the sergeant about you and the chances are that he may consent to the three of you accompanying me. I'll promise to do all I can."

"That will be splendid of you," Dick blurted out. "All of us will appreciate your kindness. I don't know how to thank you."

"Don't try," laughed the policeman. "Everything will be all right, I assure you. Where are your two friends sleeping?"

"They're bunking in the room next to the factor's," answered Dick. "Shall I go and wake them?"

"Wait until I go. First of all, I'd like to be sure

about the ponies. Unless you have them, you'll never be able to get over to Wandley's in time to meet Pearly."

"Sandy and I have a pony each," Dick assured him. "They're out in the stable now with four others, which belong to Factor MacClaren. We'll pick out one of Mr. MacClaren's horses for Toma. If you say the word, we can saddle-up and be away from here in less than fifteen minutes."

"That's the spirit!" Corporal Rand declared. "However, it will not be necessary for you to start as soon as that. I think you'd better remain for about three-quarters of an hour after I leave. It might be a good idea to take emergency rations and an extra blanket or two. In eight or ten hours there may be a decided change in the temperature. It is always best to be prepared."

The mounted policeman tip-toed softly over to the table, struck a match and re-lit the lamp.

"Now, Dick," he spoke hurriedly, "I'm going to leave you. In a very few minutes I'll be hitting the trail. I want you to remember everything I've told you—but above all, be cautious and careful. When the time comes, wake Sandy and Toma and make as little noise as possible. Unless it is absolutely necessary, don't disturb Factor MacClaren." He turned and held out his hand. "Good-bye, and good luck to you!"

"Good-bye," said Dick, accompanying the corporal

as far as the door. "I hope everything goes well with you."

A moment later, the door had closed behind the trim, athletic figure and Dick was left with his mind whirling confusedly. The events of the night, incident following incident so closely, formed a chaotic picture, which passed in review before his weary eyes. With difficulty, he stifled a yawn, at the same time looking a wee bit covetously at the clean, white bed at the far side of the room.

"I'll wait here for ten or fifteen minutes before I steal over to wake Toma and Sandy. Gee, I'm so tired I don't even dare to sit down."

He began a restless pacing back and forth across the room, occasionally glancing up at the little clock that stood on a shelf near the door. The minutes seemed interminable. A cold sweat broke out upon his face, his hands twitched nervously.

"Still five minutes more," sighed the impatient young man. "This suspense is terrible. I hope—"

A slight noise in the hallway outside riveted his attention. He swung about on his heel, took a few steps forward, then stood stock still, shaking with excitement. It seemed as if some ghostly hand was opening the door. Slowly, a few inches at a time, it swung on its hinges, and presently the bearded, uncouth face of Murky Nichols appeared through the aperture.

"Stayin' up kind o' late, ain't yuh?" he drawled out in an insinuating voice.

Dick's two hands went up to his chin. He made a gesture of pain.

"I've been up all night with this pesky toothache," he said a little shakily. "Nothing that I can do has seemed to help very much."

Murky pushed his way into the room, his evil mouth twisted into a sneer. At the same time, Dick dropped back, edging his way over near the table, where his rifle stood. Murky's voice broke an interval of silence.

"I shore feel sorry for yuh, young feller," he grimaced. "Toothache ain't no fun. Ain't anything I can do, is there?"

"No," answered Dick, "it will stop aching presently, I hope. Thank you, just the same."

As he spoke, he glanced furtively at the clock. It was now twenty minutes after one—time to wake Sandy and Toma. In less than half an hour they were due to start for the Wandley post. His problem now was to get rid of Nichols. On some pretext or other he must induce Murky to leave the room. But how?

Dick groaned inwardly as the prospector yanked forward a chair and sat down. All the while his black, penetrating eyes were studying him closely. His manner and expression showed only too plainly

that he was not in the least deceived by Dick's lie.

"If I can't help yuh, I can keep yuh company," he remarked, his thin lips curling up at the corners in a faint indication of a smile.

"O, no, that won't be necessary," Dick hastened to tell him. "You must be tired yourself. It has stopped paining me a little now and I think I'll pop into bed. You'd better go to your own room, Murky."

With exasperating slowness, Nichols fumbled in a pocket for tobacco and pipe. He stretched out his long legs at the end of a few minutes, puffing contentedly. Evidently, he had no intention of moving just then.

Dick glanced at the clock again. He had grown desperate—and angry. Back and forth he paced, one hand held to his chin, trying to think of some way in which he might outwit the imperturbable prospector. Anger, finally, overcame his caution and he stopped short in front of the lanky, indolent form.

"I'll have to ask you to get out," he heard himself saying. "I'm going to bed."

Nichols looked up into Dick's indignant face, grinned exasperatingly, and rose lazily to his feet.

"Well, all right, if yuh say so. I jes' happened to see your light under the door an' I thought I'd drop in. Feel kind o' nervous myself after what

happened this afternoon. Don't care atall 'bout goin' tuh bed. Guess I'll walk up an' down the hall fer a while."

Still grinning, he opened the door and went out. That he actually intended to remain in the hallway for a time, there could be no doubt. His suspicions had become aroused and he had shown by his actions that he was frankly skeptical of Dick's story. Standing guard outside, he had his youthful suspect almost as completely under surveillance as if he had remained in the room.

Dick bolted and locked his door and made ready for his departure. Then he blew out the light and sat down on the edge of the bed—waiting! Tears of rage and exasperation welled into his eyes. They were delayed now—and no immediate prospect of a start. How long would Nichols keep watch in the hallway? Dick gritted his teeth and swore vengeance upon the wily outlaw.

The wind, rattling at the window, suddenly gave him an idea. The window! Funny he hadn't thought about that before! It would be a simple task to raise the sash and slip around the building to Sandy's and Toma's room. Once there he would tap lightly on the pane outside until Toma, ever a restless sleeper, would come to admit him.

A grim smile played around the corners of his mouth as he thought about Murky standing guard just outside his door to prevent his escape. He was

half-chuckling to himself as he tugged at the sash there in the darkness. It went up with only a slight squeak, and Dick slipped through the opening with a wildly exultant heart.

Hurrying around the house, a few moments later he stood just outside the sleeping boys' window. With his bared knuckles, he wrapped softly on a square of glass, continuing intermittently until a shadow appeared on the opposite side, and a sleepy voice demanded to know what was the matter.

"Open up!" Dick called softly.

Toma complied willingly enough, and it was not long before Dick stood within the room.

Whispering a word of warning to the young Indian guide, he pulled a blanket from the bed and threw it down in front of the door. Then he lit the lamp. In night attire, rubbing his eyes sleepily, Toma regarded his friend in wonderment. What sort of trick was this? Dick's and Sandy's pranks were well known to him, and, judging from the broad smile that quickly lit up his usually mobile features, it was apparent that he believed that Sandy was to be made the victim of another practical joke. However, Dick hurriedly disillusioned him.

"No fooling this time, Toma," he whispered into the Indian's ear. "It may be a life or death matter. The police want our help. We haven't a minute to lose."

"What we do?" asked Toma.

"We're to carry a message to Constable Pearly at Wandley's post. It is nearly two in the morning now. We must get there before noon."

"How we go so fast like that?" Toma wanted to know.

"Ponies," answered Dick. "Wake Sandy up while I gather together a few things we may need. If Sandy starts talking before he is fully awake, shove a pillow in his mouth. Get busy! We'll have to hurry!"

CHAPTER VII

WANDLEY'S POST

THE boys reached Wandley's Post shortly after twelve o'clock and just in time to intercept Constable Pearly, who had arrived early and was saddling up in preparation for his departure. Their ponies covered with mud and lather, Dick and his two companions dashed into the compound and came to an abrupt halt not twenty feet from the policeman himself, who had come rushing to the door of the stable at the first sound of clattering hoofs.

Dick stumbled from his mount and limped forward with the message in his hands.

"From Corporal Rand at Fort Good Faith," he explained, presenting the letter. "I'm Dick Kent. These are my two friends, Sandy MacClaren and John Toma. At Corporal Rand's request we rode over from Fort Good Faith this morning."

The corporal acknowledged the introduction with a friendly smile and a hand-clasp for each of the three mud-bespattered messengers. Then he tore up the envelope. As he read its contents, a slight frown settled and overspread his face.

"This is important news. Thanks very much for bringing it over. I see that the three of you are to go with me."

"Yes; that's what we understood," Dick replied.

Pearly rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"It's only a few miles from here to our destination. You'll have plenty of time to rest and get something to eat before we start."

Sandy greeted this declaration with an exclamation of approval. The boys were ravenously hungry and so stiff and sore that they could scarcely walk. Loss of sleep and the hard ride from Fort Good Faith had worn Dick's endurance to a shred. He was nearly tottering as he reached out for the bridle-reins of his pony and led the fagged and foot-sore little beast through the open door of the stable.

A few minutes later, having cared for their tired mounts, they accompanied Constable Pearly to Wandley's trading room. Just outside the door, Dick, happening to glance through the window, drew back suddenly with a cry of surprise. Seated at one of the tables was the burly figure of La Qua, and immediately opposite, their heads bent forward in discussion, were the two half-breeds who had played such a conspicuous part in the affairs of the previous day. Dick seized Pearly's arm, just as the latter reached for the latch-string.

"We can't go in there, constable," he declared excitedly, his voice hoarse and tremulous. "Quick!

Let's get away from here. If we step inside, it'll spoil everything."

In spite of Sandy's remonstrances and the policeman's puzzled and questioning look, Dick hurriedly led the way back to the compound before he could be induced to offer a single word of explanation.

"It's La Qua," he broke forth eagerly, "the man who will be in charge of the pack-train Murky is sending over to Blind Man's Pass tonight. He was sitting in there at one of the tables. He's already suspicious of me, and it would never do to meet him again now."

"Are you sure it's La Qua?" Pearly wished to know.

Dick nodded his head emphatically.

"Yes, I am sure. He was over at Good Faith yesterday—in fact, until one o'clock this morning—consulting with Murky Nichols. One of the two men with him is the half-breed Corporal Rand arrested for attempting to stab Nichols."

"Stab Nichols!" Pearly's face lit up with sudden interest. "I hadn't heard about it. When did this happen?"

"Yesterday afternoon," Dick replied. "I thought perhaps Rand had mentioned it to you in his letter."

"No," answered Pearly, "he had too many other things to tell me. Most of his message was taken up with instructions which we are to follow as soon as we leave this post."

Sandy's dispirited face clouded still more as the moments passed. Unable longer to withstand the gnawing demands of his stomach, he stepped forward and demanded:

"What about something to eat? Just because that blamed outlaw is sitting in there, is no reason why we should all go hungry. Constable Pearly, isn't there something you can suggest?"

"Certainly," smiled the constable, "I can easily arrange that. But first we'd better find a more suitable hiding place than this."

"What about the loft in the stable?" proposed Dick.

"As good a place as any," Pearly decided, glancing across at Sandy's wan and disconsolate features. "I'll hustle back to the trading room and purchase a few things for you to eat. While I'm doing that, the three of you can go up to the loft."

The boys entered the barn and climbed the rickety ladder to the floor above. Crossing over to a large pile of hay, they flung themselves down to await the constable's return. It was not long before he reappeared.

With a sigh of intense satisfaction, Sandy reached out for the packages Pearly had handed over and began dividing their contents.

"I had a good look at this man, La Qua, and the three half-breeds," the policeman informed them.

"From what little of their conversation I was able to overhear, it is evident that they are about to leave Wandley's. They'll probably proceed at once to Settlement Mountain."

"Will they follow the same trail as we will?" asked Dick.

Constable Pearly nodded. "Yes, there's only one route which leads off in that direction. They will go directly past the bend in the river, where we are to await the coming of Richardson and Rand. Our best plan is to remain here until La Qua and his two men leave. Then we can follow them leisurely. As I said before, we have only a few miles to go. I think we'd better not take our horses with us. I'll make arrangements with Wandley himself to have them looked after."

Pearly excused himself, and a short time later the boys could hear his measured tread across the frozen ground outside.

"He'll keep a sharp eye on La Qua," decided Sandy. "I don't imagine the outlaw will stay here very long if they are really planning to set out with the pack-train tonight."

"Constable Pearly him pretty good policeman," said Toma.

"Yes, he's the new man from the Peace River detachment," Dick explained. "Corporal Rand spoke highly of him."

Sandy yawned and stretched out his legs. Since eating, it was quite apparent that he felt much better. Eyes twinkling, he looked across at Dick.

"I'm beginning to feel like a new man myself. I'll be ready to start any time. I honestly believe, Dick, that I'm going to enjoy this adventure almost as much as I would the trip to the coast. Hope nothing happens to prevent a change in the outlaws' plans to start for the pass tonight."

"I don't believe anything is likely to occur now," responded Dick. "La Qua seems to be very anxious to return to Settlement Mountain. I'll be very much surprised if the pack-train doesn't leave there soon after dark."

The boys were so busily engaged in discussing the proposed trip that they did not hear Constable Pearly when he stole silently up the ladder and emerged to the loft. Dick turned quickly at the policeman's approach, then started in surprise. The constable's face was grave, his manner a little furtive. A slight frown had etched more deeply the lines in his forehead. As he came over to where the three boys sat, he raised a finger to his lips.

"I can't understand it," he whispered. "The two half-breeds have gone! But that isn't all! Murky Nichols rode up to the door of the trading room a few minutes ago, and he and La Qua are conferring now just outside. I wonder what it means?"

Dick's face fell. Here was an unlooked-for turn

of events. A feeling of disappointment swept over him. So Murky had become alarmed and had left Fort Good Faith as soon as he had discovered that he, Dick, had eluded him. Was he here to instruct La Qua not to send the pack-train of stolen fur through the pass?

In as few words as possible, Dick informed Pearly of the incidents of the previous night, describing Murky's suspicious attitude when he had forced his way into Dick's room.

"Do you think," he concluded, "that Nichols has come expressly for the purpose of warning La Qua?"

The constable folded his arms and stood for a short time, his brow wrinkled in thought.

"It is hard to guess what will be the outcome of this visit," he answered finally, "or to know definitely Murky's purpose. But it is easy to see that he came here on some matter of extreme importance. His horse nearly dropped from exhaustion as he rode in. Its flanks were steaming wet, spattered with mud, while under its belly were two horrible welts which the brute had inflicted with his spurs. At any other time, I would have arrested Murky on the spot for cruelty to a poor dumb animal."

As he spoke, Pearly's eyes flashed with indignation.

"He's driven furiously all the way from Fort

Good Faith," he went on. "He would never have done that unless the occasion warranted the effort."

"I guess we'd better remain in hiding," trembled Sandy. "Do you think we'll be safe here, constable?"

A ghost of a smile played across the policeman's weather-tanned features.

"If you mean 'safe from detection'—I doubt it. Sooner or later some one is certain to enter this loft and will find you here. Murky may lead his horse into the stable at any moment."

"Even if he does, he may not come to the loft," reasoned Dick. "There is plenty of hay piled up in the stable below."

"But what about your ponies? Wouldn't he recognize them?"

Dick and Sandy gasped in unison. Toma bounded to his feet with a guttural exclamation of dismay.

"Nichols be sure know ponies right away," he declared excitedly.

"What do you think we'd better do?" Sandy quavered.

"Get your horses out of the stable as quickly as possible," Pearly replied. "This young man here" —indicating Toma—"can give me a hand. Come on! We'll have to hurry. You two," motioning Dick and Sandy to remain seated, "will remain here. I'll let you know just as soon as the coast is clear. I may possibly find another hiding place."

"They'll take them out through the back door," said Dick.

A noise below, followed by the creaking of a door, indicated to the boys that Constable Pearly and Toma were taking out the ponies. Soon after another sound came from the front of the building. Almost immediately, Dick heard someone walking across the stable floor and the gruff voices of La Qua and Nichols.

Although they listened intently, neither Dick nor Sandy could hear any of the conversation. The rumbling tones died away presently. A tense moment had passed. Sandy rose and tip-toed across the loft, endeavoring to peep out through a narrow slit between the logs. He was about to turn to come back, when he became visibly excited, motioning frantically to his chum.

"La Qua has taken out his horse!" he whispered breathlessly to Dick, as soon as the other had joined him.

"Is Murky going with him?" asked Dick.

Sandy stepped back to permit the other to look through the tiny aperture.

"No," he answered. "From the look of it, Murky intends to remain here. La Qua is probably going on to Settlement Mountain."

Dick caught sight of a fleeting roan, upon which was astride the slouching, unkempt figure of La Qua. Then abruptly he was startled by the sound

of the door of the stable creaking open again, and a few moments later, heavy steps upon the ladder, leading to the loft.

For one brief moment, Dick's heart leaped to his throat. Had Murky Nichols learned of their presence there? Or was it Constable Pearly and Toma? He and Sandy stood shaking with suppressed excitement, their eyes riveted on the trap-door. Both breathed a sigh of relief as the flushed face of the mounted policeman appeared through the opening. Behind him, came Toma. Dick and Sandy rushed forward excitedly to meet them.

"Do you think La Qua is going on to Settlement Mountain?" Dick asked.

The constable paused to brush the dust from his tunic. A thoughtful expression shadowed his face.

"This thing is getting more and more complicated," he finally broke forth. "I don't know what to make of it. If La Qua has really gone on to Settlement Mountain in anticipation of the trip tonight, I can't understand why Nichols did not accompany him."

"Perhaps he is here to watch our movements," said Dick. "He may have heard of our arrival."

Pearly compressed his lips and looked searchingly at the three boys.

"Did any one see you when you rode up?" he demanded.

Sandy and Dick both shook their heads, but Toma

—it was quite apparent—had important information to impart.

"I see 'em two fellows walk away from compound just when we ride up," came his startling revelation. "Me no sure, but I think mebbe one fellow him white man."

"Where did they go?" snapped Pearly.

"Don't know," answered the young Indian guide. "When we get close I see 'em no more. Mebbe they walk around building and go in trading room."

A deep silence followed this last statement. Pearly regarded Dick with questioning eyes. Sandy rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Do you suppose that it was La Qua and one of the half-breeds, and that they recognized us?"

The constable made an impatient gesture.

"This is all conjecture and will get us nowhere. We have no way of determining whether the outlaws know you are here or not. The thing to do is to assume that they haven't seen you, and lay our plans accordingly. Toma and I have staked out the ponies about a hundred yards from here in a shallow coulee that slopes down to the shore of Settlement House River. Your next move will be to get over there without Murky seeing you."

"But what will we do with the ponies now?" Sandy interposed.

"I'm coming to that. As I previously informed you, I had intended to ask Wandley to look after

them. That is out of the question now with Nichols here. They must remain hidden from his inquisitive eyes—kept out of sight entirely. The only thing I can think of just now is to take them with us to the meeting place near the bend of the river."

The constable paused for a brief moment before he resumed:

"Please listen to me closely. I'm going back to the trading room and strike up an acquaintance with our friend, Mr. Nichols. I'll engage him in conversation for ten or fifteen minutes. That will give you plenty of time to make your way to the coulee undetected. Wait for five or six minutes after I go before you leave the loft."

"When we get to the coulee," inquired Dick, "we're to wait for you. Is that the understanding?"

"Yes," nodded Pearly, turning to go, "I'll rejoin you there in half an hour. I'll ride my own horse over."

Without further word, the policeman disappeared through the opening again, much to the amusement of Sandy.

"He must be tired climbing up and down that ladder," he grinned. "Is this the fourth or the fifth time he's been up here?"

"This is no joking matter," Dick reproved him. "Sandy, I've left my watch at home. Have you got yours?"

"Yes," answered Sandy, feeling in his pocket.

"Better hold it in your hand until the time comes for us to slip away from here."

Sandy followed out the suggestion with alacrity. Silence fell over the little party, a silence so deep that Dick could have sworn that he could hear the faint ticking of his chum's watch. An interminable period seemed to have passed before Sandy raised his arm.

"Time to go!" he whispered eagerly.

CHAPTER VIII

THE AMBUSCADE

Toma led the way to the coulee where the ponies were picketed. On the road thither they had met no one, and were in consequence in high spirits as they pushed forward through the trees, entered the draw, and came finally to the screen of thicket beyond which the horses munched contentedly on the dry grass covering the space around them.

Dick noted with deep concern that the wind had veered round more to the north and that the weather had become appreciably cooler. As yet there was no hint of a storm. Scarcely a cloud could be seen across the blue expanse of sky.

Sandy drew his coat more tightly about him and sat down in the shelter of a small thicket, while Dick and Toma began a restless pacing back and forth in the cleared space near the ponies. They were thus occupied when the sound of clattering hoofs heralded the approach of Constable Pearly.

A moment later he drew up in front of them, smiling down cheerily.

"I guess we might as well start," he declared.

"As soon as you boys have saddled up, we'll strike off along the Settlement River trail. We have plenty of time and can proceed slowly."

The boys hastened to obey. Presently they drew away from the coulee, keeping well within the shelter of spruce and jack-pine bordering the river. A few hundred yards farther on they picked up the faint thread of a trail, which soon brought them to the main travelled road. Here, two abreast, Constable Pearly and Toma in the lead, they jaunted leisurely along.

Conversation lagged. For some unknown reason, the little party rode under a cloud of dejection. Pearly's face had become set and stern; Sandy slumped in his saddle; Toma's eyes wandered furtively from side to side; while Dick himself was obsessed by a sense of foreboding. This feeling persisted as they continued slowly on their way. Strive as he would against it, he could not shake off the thought of impending disaster. It was as if the gray spectre of some great trouble followed in their rear.

Dick wondered if this unpleasant phantasm had come as the result of his nervous strain and lack of sleep, or if it was really a warning. Ought he to tell Constable Pearly? Pressing his heels against his pony's flanks, he cantered up behind the policeman for the purpose of doing so, but on second thought decided against it. Pearly would probably

laugh at him and with just cause, for his fears were groundless. It was folly even to think about it. He must endeavor to get a better grip of himself.

A moment later, he wished he had acted upon his first impulse. The constable suddenly threw his hands high in the air and dropped from his saddle. The reverberating report of a rifle, a puff of smoke from the side of the trail, the fleeting glimpse of someone hurtling away through the underbrush—all were vivid impressions, indelibly traced across Dick's mind. With a snort of fear, his horse had thrown himself back so abruptly that its rider had nearly become unseated. Dick sprang to the ground just as Toma, who had already dismounted, stooped over Pearly's prostrate form.

"Is he dead!" gasped Dick.

Sandy rode up, his cheeks ashen with horror, a revolver gripped in one trembling hand.

"The half-breed!" he faltered. "The same man who tried to stab Nichols. I saw him!"

"The yellow, despicable cur!"

As he spoke, Dick placed two hands gently under the constable's broad shoulders, and supporting the wounded man's head against his own body, raised the limp, but still breathing, form to a more upright position.

"He may be mortally wounded," he declared in a stricken voice. "We must do something quickly. We'll have to take him back to Wandley's post."

Toma quickly unbuttoned the policeman's tunic. A red stain colored the cloth beneath. With his hunting knife, the young guide slit open the shirt and undergarment, revealing the wound itself—a dangerous one, a few inches below the right arm-pit.

As Dick well knew, every member of the mounted police force was required to carry a first-aid kit. Acting upon this knowledge, he and Toma hurriedly went through the stricken man's pockets until they discovered the object of their search. Absorbent cotton, bandages, adhesive tape and a small bottle of disinfectant were yanked out of the container and placed in handy proximity. Toma began the work of dressing the wound with the calm deliberateness of an experienced surgeon. At the end of a few minutes he straightened up, breathing a sigh of relief.

"Mebbe by do that we help save his life," he murmured hopefully. "Next thing—how we get him back to Wandley's? Constable Pearly him too big to tie on horse. What you think?"

The boys looked from one to the other in dismay. How indeed, was this imperative task to be accomplished. Dick thrust his hands disconsolately in his pockets, unable to think of any adequate plan. Sandy dismounted and strode forward.

"Do you suppose that we could place him on one of the smaller ponies," he suggested, "and support him by riding on either side—three horses abreast?

It seems to be the only way. We could link our arms in his and drive carefully."

Dick and Toma remained thoughtful for a moment, considering Sandy's plan.

"It may work," Dick decided. "At any rate, we must do something quickly."

To raise the limp and heavy figure to the saddle proved to be a difficult task. The ponies snorted and swung back. Dick was almost in despair before they finally succeeded in getting the wounded man in place and had made a start for Wandley's post. He rode on one side of the policeman and Toma on the other. Long before they had traversed the first few hundred yards, their arms ached from the burden. Also some difficulty was experienced in keeping the ponies together.

In places, where the trail narrowed down to a mere foot-path, they were compelled to break the close formation. At such times, one of the boys would be compelled to dismount and support the figure from the ground until the road again grew wider.

Altogether, it was a sorry and dejected group that made its way back over the selfsame route they had come only a few minutes before. In the twinkling of an eye, the carefully laid plans of Corporal Rand had miscarried. Their hopes had gone glimmering. Murky Nichols had shown his hand. One of Dick's greatest worries just now was that the crafty outlaw

himself would soon witness their arrival at the post.

Moving along carefully, their arms and shoulders aching from the strain put upon them, they came at last within sight of Wandley's. As they emerged upon the small prairie, at the far side of which the post was situated, they came directly in the path of a sharp "northwester." The smiling sky of an hour previous had become leaden with menace. Dun, metal-colored clouds scudded before the wind. The horizon, black and threatening, indicated only too plainly the approach of a storm.

They rode up to the door of the trading room in a dispirited silence. A curious group gathered about them. Anxiously, Dick scanned the unfamiliar faces, expecting to see that of Murky Nichols. But the outlaw was not there. Willing hands assisted them in lifting Pearly down from his precarious seat and help carry him within. The solicitous figure of Wandley himself presently pushed forward through the crowd.

"Mon Dieu! What has happened?" cried a voice.

"A policeman!" gasped Wandley, his good-humored face suddenly gray with concern. "Who shot him?"

Sandy mumbled something under his breath. Dick turned his head and looked up appealingly into the horrified eyes of the free trader.

"Will you help us out, Mr. Wandley? Constable Pearly's condition is serious."

Wandley took in the situation at a glance. He was a man of action. In an incredibly short space he had placed a room at the policeman's disposal, and in various ways assisted in making him comfortable. A short time later, the three boys followed Wandley to the trading room, where they told the story of the ambuscade.

The free trader listened with wrapt attention. A stolid, heavy-set man, known throughout the North for his honesty and sincerity of purpose, he showed by his manner and expression unmistakably what he thought of the outrage.

"Who do you suppose could have been guilty of such a dastardly attack?" he asked at the conclusion of the boys' recital. "Did you see the person who fired the shot?"

Sandy was about to tell Wandley of his suspicions, when Dick silenced him with a look. Other persons were within hearing and might carry the information to Nichols.

"No," he lied deliberately, "we haven't the faintest idea. Sandy, here, thought he caught a glimpse of a person running in the underbrush shortly after the shot was fired. But we have no knowledge of his identity."

Wandley turned sympathetic eyes upon his three informants.

"I'll see that everything possible is done for

Pearly," he promised them. "I'm sending over to the Indian village for a native doctor who has often proved to be very good in cases of this kind."

The boys thanked the free trader and turned to go. They still had time to reach the bend in the river before the coming of Sergeant Richardson and Corporal Rand. Their own ponies were waiting outside. At the door, moved by a sudden impulse, Dick pressed Sandy's arm significantly, then hurried back to Wandley's side.

"May I have a word with you for a moment?" he inquired meaningly.

The free trader started back in surprise.

"Why certainly. What is it?"

Motioning the other to follow, he led the way to an inner room, which served as Wandley's office.

"Now what's the trouble, my boy?" he asked.

Dick stood awkwardly, cap in hand, a little confused, a little doubtful whether, after all, it would be good policy to ask the question now uppermost in his mind. Wandley seemed to sense the young man's difficulty. He patted Dick's arm.

"Don't be afraid to speak up, if it is anything of importance," he said reassuringly. "You can trust me absolutely."

Dick smiled across at the grizzled, earnest face.

"All right, Mr. Wandley, there is something I want to know."

"What is it?"

"Did you see Murky Nichols here an hour or two ago, when he arrived here at the post?"

"Yes," Wandley unhesitatingly replied. "He rode in here like a dozen furies shortly after one o'clock. But he's gone now."

"So he's really gone?" Dick breathed a sigh of relief.

"Yes," answered the free trader, wondering what his young interrogator was driving at.

"How long since he left?" came the next question.

"Not more than fifteen or twenty minutes ago. He was hardly out of sight before you came in with Pearly."

"Which trail did he take?"

"The one to Fort Good Faith."

Dick stepped forward and pressed the huge hand of the free trader.

"Thank you very much. I'll explain sometime, Mr. Wandley, but I'll have to hurry now. We'll stop in to see you on our return."

Saying which, Dick hurried through the door, crossed the trading room and quickly rejoined his two friends outside.

CHAPTER IX

THE MEETING PLACE

FAINT flecks of snow were falling as they took the first turn in the trail at top speed. The wind had increased in velocity. It had become a gale that bent the tops of the spruce and poplar, driving down a fine icy sleet through the trees. Toma raised anxious eyes to the lowering sky and presently shrieked out above the roar of the approaching storm:

"Big blizzard come pretty soon. How far we go before we get to bend in river?"

"It's only a short distance," Dick answered, yelling at the top of his voice.

At a brisk canter, they passed the place of the recent ambuscade, soon afterward following the trail across an open meadow in the very teeth of the storm. For a moment a white, driving curtain of snow almost suffocated them. Only with difficulty could they drive their ponies into it.

"We're licked!" shouted Sandy. "I dread to think of waiting for anyone in this blizzard. The pack-train will never be able to start tonight."

When they had gained the woodland again, it was almost impossible to make out their surroundings clearly. Overhead was a gray impenetrable blur. Within the shelter of the trees, when Dick, straining his eyes against the whirling particles of snow, endeavored to get his bearings, he could see scarcely fifty yards ahead. Somewhere off to the right was Settlement House River. Judging from the distance they had already come, they must be close to their destination right now.

Dick drew up his horse sharply, calling a halt. His two chums came closer.

"I think we've gone far enough," was Sandy's opinion, as they sat huddled on their tired mounts, looking into each other's apprehensive eyes. "My suggestion is to leave the trail here and strike off to the right in the direction of the river. What do you think, Toma?"

The guide did not immediately reply. His face was calm and expressionless. There was no outward manifestation of his secret, inner emotions. Just then he was not thinking of the bend in the river at all. Indeed, he had become so absorbed in his own thoughts that he was scarcely conscious even of the presence of his two companions. At that particular moment his mind was concentrated on a matter of extreme importance. He gazed sombrely at the trail at their feet, across which, plainly visible in the freshly fallen snow, were the imprints of moccasined feet.

Only a few minutes before someone had passed that way. The quick mind of the guide reverted to the shooting of Constable Pearly. From ambush, a man had deliberately shot down the mounted policeman. Were these tracks, which he saw now, made by that selfsame man? Was the half-breed planning a second attack?

Toma did not wish to alarm Dick and Sandy needlessly. Yet he was possessed of a feeling—intuitive perhaps—that the near presence of the man boded no good to them. If it was the same person who had wounded Constable Pearly, it was reasonable to suppose that he would not hesitate to draw a gun upon them.

It was a predicament indeed—and one fraught with danger. The footprints led away in the same direction that Sandy now proposed to go. It would be foolhardy for the three of them to take a chance. Turning the problem over and over in his mind, Toma came to a decision.

"No use all three ride over an' try find 'em place where we meet Sergeant Richardson. What you say I go alone? Sandy, you Dick stay here in shelter of bush. No take 'em me very long. If I find bend, I come back pretty quick an' let you know."

The young guide's proposal did not meet with the instant approval that he had expected.

"No," growled Sandy, "we can all go. What's the use of staying here?"

"Look here, Toma," interposed Dick, "three pairs of eyes are better than one."

Toma scowled. He feigned an angry indifference.

"All right. I do what you say. I think you 'fraid mebbe poor Toma get lost."

Sandy reached up and snapped off the brittle twig from a branch just over his head. He regarded it reflectively.

"Pshaw! Let him have his own way, Dick. If he insists, I don't mind in the least. I'm going to crawl off this old nag of mine and stretch my legs."

As if the matter were already settled, Sandy scrambled off his mount and led it over to a thick clump of bushes, which offered better protection from the storm. After a moment's hesitation, Dick followed his example. The two crouched there while Toma sprang to the ground, tied his horse to a young sapling and then struck off sharply to the right on foot. In a few seconds he became lost to view.

Dick and Sandy brushed away the snow from a small space in front of them and sat down, weary and disheartened. The ponies turned with their backs to the wind. Dick was so sleepy and tired from his long hours of wakefulness that he had scarcely sat down when his head began to nod, and soon after he drowsed off completely. How long he slept he did not know. He was awakened by the

hand of his chum, clawing roughly, excitedly at his shoulder. He opened his eyes to look into the startled face of his friend.

"Did you hear it?" gasped Sandy.

Bewildered from sleep, Dick could not imagine what sound Sandy alluded to, when abruptly there came to his ears the faint report of a rifle.

"There it is again!"

The boys jumped to their feet, gazing fearfully out through the storm. They trembled at the thought of what might now have happened. They stood shivering in the teeth of the icy gale, their faces gray with apprehension. After a time, following the first shock, Dick turned to Sandy.

"It frightened me at first," he confessed. "Thought it was the half-breed. For a moment, I didn't think about Toma. He probably saw a moose or bear and fired at it."

Sandy was not so sure. He shook his head doggedly, staring gloomily away in the direction of the river.

"We'd better investigate, Dick," he trembled. "Even if Toma did see a moose, I doubt very much whether he would have taken a shot at it."

"The hunting instinct in every Indian is strong," argued his chum. "Even you or I would have been liable to act the same under similar circumstances."

Sandy was not convinced. With his moccasined

feet he kicked at a drift of freshly fallen snow. Nervously, his hand played with the holster at his belt.

"Perhaps I'm foolish, but I can't help thinking that something has gone wrong. The sound we just heard, although fainter, was very much like the one we heard this afternoon when Pearly was wounded. Besides, if I remember correctly, Toma has no rifle. All he has in the way of firearms is a small automatic, which could not possibly make as much noise as we heard just now."

Dick's face became sober again. He looked at Sandy in alarm.

"But all of us had rifles strapped to our saddles when we set out from Fort Good Faith," he pointed out.

"You and I—but not Toma! When Toma and I went out on our hunting trip a few days ago, he broke the trigger-spring on his gun, and yesterday, when we returned, he left it at the Indian village to be repaired. When you wakened us last night, I had my rifle in my room. Toma had none. I know I'm right about this, Dick."

It was the other's turn to become alarmed. With an excited exclamation he stepped forward, and with fumbling fingers began to remove his own rifle from the saddle. Sandy followed suit. Without further preliminary, they hurried to the rescue.

Shoulders hunched, faces wet with melting snow,

they darted forward through the underbrush. Dick's heart was beating miserably at the thought of this new danger. Had Toma also been waylaid—probably murdered? Desperately, he stared ahead, expecting momentarily to find the crumpled figure of the young guide lying in the snow. They progressed farther and farther away from the trail. Sandy's breath came in choking gasps.

"Toma! Toma!" he kept repeating.

Presently their hopes mounted. Thus far they had found nothing. Perhaps the young Indian was still alive. Perhaps in some miraculous way he had escaped the half-breed's death-dealing bullets.

Through the blinding snow-mist directly ahead, they made out the vague outline of Settlement House River. Toma's tracks had become obliterated here. They had emerged upon an open space across which the wind had full sweep. They would be unable now to track Toma down. If they found him at all, it would be through some lucky chance, rather than through any direct effort on their part. Fifty yards ahead, standing like a huge sentinel, guarding the descent to the river, the boys discerned a large jack-pine.

Toward it they made their way, reached it after a short interval, and glanced down along the slope expectantly. But there was no sign of anyone. The storm now had reached its height. Snow and sleet lashed across the earth. Trees bent their heads be-

fore the furious blast. Both Dick and Sandy had seen many blizzards, but never such a one as this.

Sandy took Dick's arm and shouted above the roar of the storm.

"No use in standing here, Dick. We may miss Toma altogether. If he's alive, he's probably back to the trail by this time. Come on! Let's hurry over there ourselves."

With a last look along the slope, Dick was about to turn, when he saw the dim outline of something just ahead. Straining his eyes, one hand shielding his face from the driving snow, he made out, at length, what was unmistakably the figure of a man. Could it be Toma? The man was afoot. Quickly, Dick started back, overcome by sudden fear. It was the half-breed—and he carried a rifle!

Springing forward down the slope, Dick pulled Sandy after him. Just ahead, a thick screen of bushes—now weighted down with snow—would hide them from view. Yet here it would still be possible to watch the movements of the figure proceeding toward them on the level ground above the slope.

Sandy removed his parka and glared back toward the spot Dick had indicated.

"The half-breed!" he whispered hoarsely. "The same man who shot Constable Pearly. What do you suppose has happened to Toma?"

Rifle in hand, the half-breed came on, looking furtively to the right and left. He seemed oblivious to

the storm. In a few moments he had approached to within fifty feet of the place where the boys lay concealed.

Instinctively, Dick and Sandy reached for their revolvers. But before they could be drawn from their holsters, the half-breed accomplished an incredible and surprising movement. His head went back with a jerk—so suddenly that he nearly lost his balance. For a moment he stood stock still, then leaped for the protecting trunk of a poplar. Above the roaring of the wind and storm, the boys heard distinctly the sound of a muffled report.

The boys rose to their feet with a cry of joy. Well they knew the meaning of the half-breed's actions and the sound they had heard. Toma was still alive! Not only that—he was carrying on a sort of running fight with the outlaw. Sandy flourished his own gun, and, had Dick not prevented it, would have fired point-blank at the figure, which, though sheltered from Toma's fire by the poplar, offered a splendid target for the boys.

"Here, Sandy!" remonstrated Dick. "Don't do that. Stop!"

"I haven't forgotten Constable Pearly," Sandy retorted angrily. "The fellow deserves it."

"Possibly he does. But it's not your place to retaliate. Toma is well able to look after himself. If I'm not mistaken the outlaw will be ready and willing to take to his heels before long."

"But Toma may be wounded," argued Sandy.

"I doubt it. If he is, it's only slightly. Our best plan is to stay here and await developments."

A few more shots from Toma's automatic drove the half-breed from his inadequate barricade. The stocky figure suddenly lurched backward, one hand grasping his arm. His rifle dropped to the ground. For a split-second his face was distorted with pain. Then, turning swiftly, he retrieved his weapon and sped toward the slope, gaining its shelter without sustaining further injury. The boys watched him as he scrambled down through the trees and underbrush in the direction of the river.

"Come on, Dick!" Sandy shouted excitedly. "We'll go over and see Toma. That's what I call marksmanship!"

"You're taking a chance if you do. In this storm Toma wouldn't be able to tell whether it was you or the half-breed. Good way to commit suicide."

"Guess I won't take a chance," grinned Sandy. "But how are we going to join him?"

"I think we'd better slip along the slope for a few hundred yards, then circle back to the trail where the ponies are," was Dick's suggestion.

The two friends proceeded to put this plan into execution. In high spirits again, now that they knew that the guide was safe, they hurried along, and in less than twenty minutes were back at the same place they had left but a short time before. They had

scarcely taken up their former position beside the ponies, when a sharp crackling in the underbrush close at hand, told them that Toma had returned. He sauntered up as if nothing had happened, his face as inscrutable and expressionless as ever.

Secretly, Sandy poked Dick in the ribs. Then he turned upon the newcomer scowling.

"Where have you been all this time?" he demanded hotly. "Did it take you nearly an hour to walk over to the river? We've been sitting here so long that we're nearly frozen."

Toma offered no explanation. He strode over and pulled the blanket from his pony.

"Mebbe we find bend little farther on. Me no think it very far now."

Dick and Sandy winked at each other as they got once more into the saddle and followed Toma along the drifting trail. For a time they rode on in silence, once more conscious of the fury of the storm. Abruptly, the trail swung to the south and very soon they could see the broken, snow-covered valley of the river—so close that it seemed as if the trail ran into it. Here was the bend at last!

Dick recalled that Corporal Rand had instructed him to descend to the floor of the valley and make camp close to the river. They proceeded to do this, first dismounting and leading the ponies after them.

A short time later they had gained their objective. The ground was level here, densely overgrown with

trees and shrubs. The river had not yet frozen over. Slush ice choked the current, making a grinding, roaring sound as it floated swiftly past. Here and there on the sandbars, large piles of ice and driftwood had been shoved ashore. In another twenty-four hours, with the steadily falling temperature, the stream would be frozen over, although it would be many days before it would be safe to cross on foot.

As he gathered driftwood for the fire, Dick's gaze returned again and again to the ice-choked current. A thought suddenly came to him. Sergeant Richardson and Corporal Rand were to meet them here at nightfall. The two were travelling westward, and it would be necessary for them to cross the river here before they could go on to the cabin of the outlaws at Settlement Mountain.

Would they be able to do it? He looked out again across the grinding, grating field of ice and slowly shook his head. It was a feat he had no desire to attempt himself. It seemed foolhardy even to think of it. Not only would a raft be in imminent danger of being broken to pieces by the drifting chunks of ice in the whirling current, but there was also the possibility of its occupants being shaken or thrown precipitately into the river.

He consulted his watch. It was now nearly four o'clock. The short afternoon would soon be terminated by the approach of darkness. Night would

descend, and he shuddered to think of any attempt on the part of the police party to cross.

When the flames from their campfire had commenced to leap up, radiating warmth and comfort in a wide circle around them, he broached the subject to Sandy and Toma.

"I don't see how they'll ever manage to get over. It's getting late now. By the time they've built a raft, it will be so dark that it will be out of the question to think of crossing."

"Mebbe him Corporal Rand know about raft somewhere on other side of river," said Toma.

"He never mentioned it to me."

Sandy, who had been sitting on the end of a fallen tree, gazing thoughtfully into the fire, looked up with a smile.

"You can trust Rand and Richardson to do the impossible," he pointed out. "I'd like to lay you a wager that if they reach the opposite side of the river tonight, they'll manage somehow to find a way to get across. Perhaps they'll come floating over on one of those huge cakes of ice."

"I won't take your bet, Sandy," Dick laughed. "Just the same I'd hate to be in their shoes."

Toma rose and walked down to the edge of the river, returning a moment later with water for tea. Huddled around the blaze, they ate from the supplies that had been purchased at Wandley's post. Dark-

ness was quickly descending. As is frequently the case in the North, the wind subsided as night approached; but the snow continued to fall. If possible, it came down thicker than ever. About them was one all-enveloping mantle of white. Even the trees and underbrush bent under the weight of their snowy burden.

The three ponies, warmly blanketed, each one tied to a long picket-rope, pawed away the snow in order to browse at the dead grass and moss underneath. Dick felt sorry for the little beasts, almost wishing that he had left them with Constable Pearly's horse at Wandley's. While he was watching them, Toma broke forth abruptly:

"Did you hear that?"

The three rose swiftly to their feet and rushed down to the shore of the river. Again came the sound—a faint halloo which trembled across the valley. The boys cupped their hands to their mouths and sent back an answering shout.

"The police party! What did I tell you, Dick? They'll make it yet!"

As he spoke, Sandy reached out and slapped Dick excitedly on the shoulder.

CHAPTER X

THE FIRST PRISONER

Swinging their arms against their bodies, and walking up and down along the river bank, from time to time the boys shouted out words of encouragement. Time dragged monotonously. Hours seemed to have passed before they heard again from the mounted policemen.

Faintly at first, then louder as it approached, they heard the scraping of the raft. Human voices sounded eerily out of the gloom. A thrill of excitement coursed along Dick's spine. The suspense was nerve-breaking. He had become almost as limp as a rag, when finally he discerned a dark shape ahead and the raft pushed in closer to shore. A few minutes later, using the long poles which had served them so well in crossing, Sergeant Richardson and Corporal Rand vaulted across the intervening space separating them from the beach.

It was a happy re-union. The three boys had not seen Sergeant Richardson for months. They wrung the policeman's hand, then escorted him and his companion back to the campfire.

"Where's Pearly?" demanded Corporal Rand, looking about him.

"Wounded," replied Dick. "We've had a terrible time, corporal. Murky Nichols followed us to Wandley's post, where he conferred with La Qua. La Qua went on to Settlement Mountain alone, first sending ahead the two half-breeds who were with him. While Pearly and the three of us were journeying along the trail on the way here, Pearly was shot down from ambush. We were compelled to take him back to Wandley's. The man who shot him was the same person you arrested yesterday—the one who attempted to stab Nichols. He's in this vicinity right now. Less than two hours ago, when Toma was reconnoitering in an effort to find this place, he fired at him several times. Toma managed to escape injury and made things so hot for him that he was compelled to seek shelter along the slope of the river."

The young guide's eyes had widened perceptibly and he stared unbelievingly at his chum.

"How you find out about that?" he blurted.

Sergeant Richardson ignored the interruption.

"Did Murky Nichols see you when you left Fort Good Faith?"

Dick flushed under the searching scrutiny.

"I don't think he saw us, but he found out about our departure right after we left." Then Dick turned to Corporal Rand. "It wasn't altogether

my fault, corporal. In less than ten minutes after you went out of my room, the door opened and Murky Nichols came in. He seemed suspicious and asked me what I was doing up at that hour. I pleaded a toothache and was finally forced to ask him to leave. He took up a position in the hall outside. It was easy to see that he did not believe my story and intended to watch me. I was compelled to slip out of the window and go around and wake Sandy and Toma. We were very quiet and I do not believe that he had any intimation of the trick we had played upon him until an hour or two after we'd gone."

Neither Richardson nor Rand had anything to say. Dick felt that their silence was in itself condemnatory.

"I did the very best I could." His voice shook a little. "Corporal Rand, I endeavored to follow out your instructions. If I have spoiled your plan, I'm sorry."

Dick turned his head to hide the tears which had suddenly welled into his eyes. Then he felt a strong comforting hand on his shoulder.

"Forget it, Dick. It's not your fault," Corporal Rand declared consolingly.

"You have all done remarkably well," Sergeant Richardson congratulated them. "I'm proud of you. In the person of Murky Nichols we have one of the cleverest, shrewdest outlaws in this North country.

He was your opponent today. You must remember that. He's not very easily outwitted."

"How badly is Pearly wounded?" asked Rand.

"Quite seriously, I think," Sandy answered. "He was unconscious and lost a good deal of blood before we could get him back to the post. Wandley is doing all that is possible for him."

"Are you going to push on to Settlement Mountain tonight?" Dick inquired, addressing Sergeant Richardson. "Or do you think that no attempt will be made to start for the pass?"

"It's hard to say. Personally, I'm inclined to believe that they will."

"But this storm!" gasped Sandy.

"I doubt if that will make a great deal of difference. I'm convinced now that they have a huge cache in their cabin at Settlement Mountain. They'll be compelled to do one of two things—either remove their fur to another place of safety, or follow their original plan to take it through Blind Man's Pass. They'll be forced to act quickly. They're in a difficult predicament and know it. From what you have already told me, it is easy to see what has happened."

The others were hanging upon the sergeant's words. He had ceased speaking for a moment and had stepped closer to the fire, his handsome upright figure outlined clearly against the background beyond. Corporal Rand addressed his superior:

"Exactly what do you mean, sergeant?"

"It is all clear enough," Richardson spoke again. "Nichols' suspicions have become aroused. When he found out that you three boys had left Fort Good Faith and had started north for Wandley's, he surmised at once what was afoot. Arriving at Wandley's and finding Pearly there, very naturally still further alarmed him. Fortunately for him, his confederate, La Qua, had not yet gone on to Settlement Mountain.

"Now put yourself in his place," he went on after a short pause. "What was to be done? A cache of stolen fur worth thousands of dollars in a cabin only a few miles away awaiting shipment—and the police aware of this fact! He would suppose naturally that Pearly intended to go immediately to seize the cache. In desperation, he ordered La Qua to send the two half-breeds ahead with instructions to ambush the police party. La Qua himself hurried on to Settlement Mountain."

"Your theory seems reasonable enough," said Corporal Rand. "But now that the outlaws know that Pearly is out of the way, do you suppose that they will do anything tonight?"

"La Qua doesn't know this. Even if he did, it would be folly on his part to take chances. Something must be done with the cache at once."

"So you really intend to start?" asked Sandy.

"Yes. Right away. Neither the corporal nor

myself have had anything to eat since this noon, but we dare not stop now."

Toma, who had gone out to gather brush for the fire, suddenly darted back within the circle of light, a startled cry on his lips.

"Quick!" he faltered. "Get to cover! I jus' see 'em someone!"

Toma's warning came in the nick of time. Motioning to the boys to drop back away from the campfire, Sergeant Richardson and Corporal Rand struck off hurriedly. With Sandy at his side, Dick found himself a moment later stumbling through snow more than ankle-deep. They could hear the sound of hurrying forms, a sharp word of command —then silence! They brought up before a willow copse, thick and almost impassable. Here they crouched low, waiting developments.

"It must be the half-breed again," Dick whispered hoarsely. "It's a good thing we scattered when we did. Anyone near the campfire would make a splendid target."

He turned and looked back toward the place they had just vacated. A bright glare of firelight cast its reflection through a wide circle of pitchy darkness, producing an eerie effect. The trees looked stark and gaunt at the outer fringe of the circle. The place, which a few moments before had been alive with the human forms of his companions, was now totally deserted.

They waited breathlessly. The commotion, following Toma's announcement, had died away. Deep and forbidding seemed the solitude of the forest. Dick wondered what had become of the two policemen and Toma. He half expected to hear the disconcerting crack of a revolver. The minutes passed slowly. The snow fell softly now—huge white flakes floating through the air like particles of fluff. Sandy stamped his feet impatiently, then pulled his parka farther down so that it muffled his face.

"If it isn't one thing, it's another," he lamented. "If that half-breed has come back to bother us, he may get more than he has bargained for."

Dick looked up sharply. A sudden tramping of feet and the crackling of underbrush, warned him of someone's approach. For a split-second his heart caught with excitement. Was the half-breed himself coming their way? Then his mouth gaped open in amazement. Within the circle of light there appeared abruptly three forms, two of which the boys quickly recognized—Richardson and Rand. They half-carried, half-dragged between them a struggling protesting creature—none other than the half-breed himself!

The boys hurried forward. As they came up to where the policemen and their prisoner stood, they observed that the half-breed's wrists had been manacled. Over his prominent cheekbone, close to his left eye, was a large welt he had received in his

encounter with the guardians of the law. Corporal Rand's uniform was slightly dishevelled. A button had been torn from his coat. He was bleeding from a cut on one cheek.

"Here's one of Murky's friends that won't give us so much trouble in the future," Sergeant Richardson stated evenly.

"He'll not be released this time either," the corporal said with conviction.

"How did you manage to capture him so quickly?" Sandy inquired wonderingly.

"I kept him occupied," the sergeant replied, "while Corporal Rand stole up on him from behind. Rand got him after a short struggle."

"We'll have to take him along with us, I suppose," said Dick.

"It can't be helped," Rand answered. "Hadn't we better start, sergeant?"

Richardson brushed the snow from his fur jacket.

"Yes. At once. Dick," he instructed, "you can saddle your ponies right away. We'll use them in breaking trail."

The boys offered the two policemen the use of their mounts but the offer was rejected.

"You'll be tired enough as it is," Corporal Rand pointed out. "Dick here hasn't had a wink of sleep in the past twenty-four hours."

The party set out shortly afterward, moving quickly through the darkness. They reached the

Settlement River trail without mishap. Not a word was spoken. Silently they trekked on. In spite of the importance of their undertaking, the travelling had become so monotonous that Dick nodded in the saddle. The crunch, crunch, crunch of the ponies' hoofs was slowly lulling him to sleep. Had his horse not stumbled occasionally over some obstruction in the trail, it is probable he might have fallen from his seat. On one of these occasions, shaken back to consciousnes when on the verge of dropping off into sound sleep, he heard the voice of Sergeant Richardson.

"Just a moment, boys, until I get my bearings."

They checked their forward progress at once. Instructing Sandy to look after the prisoner, the two policemen came up to the head of the column, conversing in low tones.

"We leave the trail here somewhere," Richardson announced. "There used to be a tiny foot-path that wound away through the trees to our left. This is the one the outlaws must use in going to and from Settlement Mountain."

"Like hunting for a needle in a haystack," Dick heard Rand remark. "Have you a flashlight, sergeant?"

A faint flicker of light appeared and the two men started up the trail, their eyes searching the ground. Dick would have pushed on after them but Toma, who was in the lead, restrained him.

"They want us to stay here," he whispered. "Come back jus' so soon find 'em pack-trail."

The curious eyes of the boys followed the retreating figures. Now and again, like a large fire-fly, the small electric torch flashed out. It appeared, disappeared, re-appeared, lending reality to the illusion.

How long they watched there, Dick could not say. He was nodding again when the two returned.

"We found it," said Sergeant Richardson. "Follow us. Sandy, keep a good watch of the prisoner."

The party came to a halt again at the juncture of the two trails. The one which threaded its way on their left, led more or less directly to Settlement Mountain.

They were now only a mile from their objective. A thrill of suppressed excitement permeated each member of the party. Dick shook off his drowsiness and now sat alert, every sense keyed to the highest pitch. The policemen continued in the lead, walking forward at a brisk rate. Toma half-swung in the saddle and asked Dick in a subdued whisper:

"You think we find 'em outlaws pretty soon?"

Dick answered hesitatingly: "Yes, I think so, Toma. It isn't very far now. Too bad you haven't your rifle."

A sudden commotion behind drew their attention. Sandy cried out in a tremulous voice as he slid from

the saddle. A moment later he was rushing wildly away through the darkness. The snapping of dry branches, the crackling of underbrush was succeeded by a weird, unearthly shout.

"The prisoner has escaped!" Dick exclaimed breathlessly.

CHAPTER XI

AN UNEXPECTED SETBACK

GUIDED by the sound at the side of the trail, Dick bounded forward to Sandy's assistance. In his excitement, he ran straight into a small sapling with a force that shook the breath from his body. Dazed, he struck forward again, tearing his face and hands in a thicket of saskatoon. Desperately, he struggled on.

Faintly outlined in the gloom ahead, he saw two struggling forms. He drove straight toward them, striking Sandy's opponent with a jarring impact. The three went to the ground in a squirming heap. The half-breed, who was fighting for his life, struck out with arms and legs like a madman. As Dick's unguarded left arm swung across his adversary's face, the outlaw sank his teeth into it, hanging there very much after the manner of a bull dog.

A blow in the pit of Sandy's stomach had put that young man temporarily out of commission. He lay groaning a few feet away. It was this sound—more than the excruciating pain he suffered himself—that finally induced Dick to shake his arm free and

scramble dizzily to his knees. But he got no further. The half-breed's manacled wrists brought down with all the strength and force of which he was capable, transferred the temporary advantage. Dick sat down with a grunt, many brilliant, multi-colored lights popping before his eyes.

The outlaw pushed himself back, turned on his side and rose hastily to his feet. He had gone only a few yards, however, when Dick, somewhat recovered from the effects of the blow, sprang up in hot pursuit. The race was of short duration. A few moments later, Dick had seized the stocky runner by the nape of the neck and had jerked him to a sudden halt.

"Guess you'll be ready to go back now," gritted Dick. "Any more of your funny tricks and I won't be responsible for what happens. Come on, now—get going!"

Sandy joined them a moment later. With the prisoner between them, they soon reached the trail. Toma and the two policemen came hurrying up.

"So he didn't get away after all!" Sergeant Richardson exclaimed thankfully. "I'm mighty glad of that. But it's my own fault. I should have known better than to give him this chance."

"Either one of you hurt?" Rand inquired anxiously.

"No," Dick replied. "We were shaken up a bit—all of us. But we're ready to go on now."

"Corporal Rand will take charge of the prisoner," Richardson instructed. "I'll lead the way alone."

They pushed on again, following closely and silently the tall figure of the police sergeant. Without incident, they travelled another quarter of a mile. Each minute was bringing them closer and closer to the outlaws' encampment. Unknown dangers lay ahead. Dick's heart beat quickly at the thought of what might presently transpire.

A short time afterward Richardson called a halt. He hurried back to confer with Corporal Rand. Then he came forward to where Dick sat and announced briefly:

"Settlement Mountain just ahead. Two hundred yards from the outlaws' cabin. Dismount quickly, tie your horses somewhere near here in the underbrush. Then come back for further orders."

The three boys complied hastily. When they returned, the sergeant spoke again:

"Corporal Rand and I are going forward to investigate. We'll leave the prisoner here with you. Under no circumstances are any of you to follow us. Remain here. We'll be back as soon as possible."

Another long wait. The boys stared out fearfully through the darkness. Their pulses pounded with excitement. Impatiently, they paced back and forth, scarcely able to endure the suspense. When finally they heard footsteps approaching, they breathed relievedly.

It was Corporal Rand. He too was excited. When he spoke, his voice was husky with some deep emotion.

"Richardson's gone!" he panted.

It was a verbal thunderbolt. The boys jumped.

"What's that?" Dick and Sandy gasped out in unison.

"Gone, I tell you!" Rand whispered hoarsely. "Gone as completely as if the earth had swallowed him up. I think they've got him. We were walking along—the sergeant about thirty feet in advance of me—when the thing happened."

It seemed incredible. A feeling of horror swept over Dick, while Sandy stood, shaking like a leaf. A poignant, miserable silence ensued.

"But—but di—did you look for him?" stammered Dick.

"Yes. I looked everywhere. In the darkness, I could see nothing. I dare not call out for fear the outlaws might be close at hand. Richardson probably walked straight into the arms of one of La Qua's sentries, was struck over the head and then dumped bodily into some thicket. It was a good thing for me that Richardson had the flashlight. I think I would have been tempted to use it."

"Good heavens! What are we going to do?"

Sandy had recovered the use of his vocal organs and now poured out his plaint—a sort of wail that rang softly through the forest's stillness.

"First Pearly and now Richardson!" groaned Dick.

"There! There!" Rand attempted to comfort them. "It's a hard blow, I'll admit, but we'll contrive to get out of this scrape somehow. You boys will have to help me. I must rely on you. I can't very well go on with this thing alone. Are you with me?"

"We are!" Dick and Sandy sang out in chorus.

"And you, Toma?"

"You bet! Fight 'em all same like mad wolf."

"That's the spirit. The first thing to do is to find out what has become of Richardson."

The five minutes which passed before Rand spoke again seemed like an eternity to the three young adventurers.

"Sandy will stay here with the prisoner and the ponies. If he attempts another break for liberty, shoot him on the spot."

The trembling young Sotchman made no reply.

"Did you hear me, Sandy?"

"Yes, sir."

"You'll do as I say?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right. Now—with regard to my plan: With the exception of Toma, we're all heavily armed. Toma, you will take the half-breed's rifle. The three of us will set out at once for the outlaws' cabin, which is situated about two hundred yards straight

ahead of us. Toma will circle around to the left, Dick to the right, while I will proceed directly along this trail to the place where Richardson disappeared. Neither one of you will fire a shot unless cornered—or in self-defense. What I want to do first of all is to try to find Richardson. If he hasn't been taken to the cabin, he won't be very far from the place I saw him last. Naturally, he'll be heavily guarded. In some way we must secure his release."

Rand ceased speaking. An unearthly hush had settled around them. Dick was shaking as if from the ague. Terror gripped him. Thankful he was that the darkness shadowed his face. He realized that his cheeks must be ghastly white. In spite of the cold, drops of moisture had gathered on his forehead. He seemed to be burning up. Like Sandy, he had temporarily lost the use of his tongue.

"Any questions to ask?" tersed Rand.

"N-n—no," Dick heard himself stammering.

"Very well then, we'll start. Remember—no shooting unless it is absolutely necessary."

They separated forthwith. Almost immediately Dick was on his way. He moved cautiously and very slowly. His terror, the choking fear of a few moments ago, had gone. It was relief to move his limbs. He had become himself once more, determined to give the very best he had—to meet danger calmly.

Off to his left he saw the twinkling lights of the

cabin. He was getting closer now; he must be still more careful, more deliberate in his movements. Perhaps the faintest sound would betray him.

Haunting the deepest shadows, he stole furtively along, treading softly through the snow—crouching here—hurrying forward there; in one place, that seemed more exposed to view, creeping forward on hands and knees.

He brought up suddenly, so startled that he nearly emitted a shriek. He stood perfectly still, his breath catching in his throat. Straight ahead, scarcely ten feet away, he saw the silhouette of one of La Qua's sentries. The man was alone, a rifle slung carelessly over the crook of his left arm. He paced silently back and forth, occasionally turning his head in the direction of the cabin.

After a moment's deliberation, Dick decided to steal past the sentry. At all cost, he must go on to the cabin. Inch at a time, he wormed his way ahead, contriving to keep a screen of underbrush between him and his enemy. Once the sharp crackling of a twig caused his heart to leap in apprehension. His hands shook. His breath seemed to burn in his throat. Instinct told him to turn precipitously and take to his heels. With difficulty was he able to steel himself for the ordeal. He was so close to the sentry now that he actually believed he could hear the man's deep breathing.

For one tense moment he waited, shrinking back

in the shadows, not daring to move. The sentry had turned his head and was looking straight in his direction. Dick thought that he could see the other's eyes, shining like those of a cat in the darkness. Then abruptly his heart almost stopped beating. For the first time he became aware of another presence. He perceived now the reason why he had not previously seen the second outlaw. This person, short in stature—unmistakably an Indian—had stood with his back against a large spruce, seeming to form a part of the trunk of the tree. But he had stepped forward now, his body limned in the half-light, and had stolen over to the right, disappearing behind the thicket in which Dick himself stood concealed.

Dick was fully conscious of the peril of his position. The Indian was probably stalking him, as a tiger stalks its prey. Not a moment was to be lost. He placed one foot gingerly in front of him and started away, quickening his pace after he had placed a few yards between himself and the sentry. A very much frightened and trembling young man moved out to the edge of the clearing which encircled the cabin.

What ought he to do now?

CHAPTER XII

THE OUTLAWS' CABIN

He could hear voices now and the hurried trampling of feet. Once a husky howled. From the open door of another building—evidently a stable—there flickered the light of several lanterns. The stable, about fifty yards on the north side of the house, was the center of unusual activity. Here men called to each other in guttural Cree amid the confusion of barking dogs and the nickering of ponies. Back and forth between the stable and the cabin the outlaws continually hurried. Dick knew what it all meant. La Qua was preparing for his departure, to take with him the cache of stolen fur.

As he stood watching and waiting, a daring plan leaped into his mind. His breath caught at the very thought of it—to walk boldly up and mingle with the outlaws. They, in the general excitement and confusion, would probably let him pass unnoticed. As long as he kept away from the tell-tale lights of the lanterns or the lamps in the cabin, he would probably be safe enough.

At any rate, he decided to do it. Thoughts of

Sergeant Richardson spurred him on. No effort or sacrifice would be too great. It was little enough to do for the man who had befriended him on so many previous occasions.

He walked boldly forth, swung in behind a tall figure hurrying toward the stable. Half way there, he stopped, glancing furtively about. He tip-toed over to the window on the side of the cabin opposite the door and looked within.

For a moment his breath caught. He was both startled and amazed at what he saw. The room, near the far end, was stacked with bales of fur reaching to a height of nearly five feet. Thousands of dollars were represented here. Wonderful black and cross-fox pelts! Rich-looking, unplucked beaver! Lynx, marten, mink—even the glistening coat of bruin himself, the least valuable of all. There were furs so valuable, so precious, that a single bale would have been more than sufficient to purchase a king's ransom.

A steady file of men entered and departed. Each carried away a heavy burden. Standing over them, La Qua threatened and gesticulated fearful lest a moment might be wasted. It was evident that the outlaw was thoroughly frightened and intended to rush through the work as quickly as possible.

Dick's gaze turned from the cache to the opposite end of the room in the hope that he might see Sergeant Richardson. But, although he craned his neck

in the effort, he could discern nothing. He had decided to slip around to another side of the dwelling, when the sound of footsteps came from the darkness beyond. Instinctively, he flattened himself against the wall of the cabin. The steps came closer. A vague form! A start of surprise—Rand!

The policeman did not see him at once, but Dick drew his attention by whistling softly and very soon the two stood close together gripping each other's hands.

"Lucky you've come," whispered Dick. "Just take a peep inside."

"I don't believe that Richardson's here," said Corporal Rand when he had stepped back. "As I came out to the clearing, I thought I saw two of the outlaws carrying something between them. Possibly the sergeant. I had no way of stealing up on them without being detected. So I decided to come on here and await their arrival."

"If it is Richardson, do you think we can get him away from the outlaws?"

"We can try."

"What plan would you suggest?"

"Wait until La Qua has taken out all of the fur and the pack-train is ready to start. They'll be compelled to leave Richardson here under guard. Our chance will come then."

Two powerful breeds appeared at the door soon

after, carrying the prostrate form of Sergeant Richardson. They dropped him, none too gently, on the floor close to the fire-place. The prisoner's limbs were bound. He was unconscious, his face ghastly white except where a small stream of blood trickled down from his forehead.

Sudden rage seared Dick's mind. His friendship for the police sergeant was great and he resented the malicious attack upon him. He could hardly contain himself as the packers left their work and advanced in a curious group, only to be driven back again by the cursing, perspiring La Qua. Then as a vent for his outraged feelings, the outlaw kicked the unconscious man in the ribs.

At sight of this gross treatment, Rand started forward, scarcely able to suppress his cry of rage. He checked himself, but one hand gripped Dick's arm, fingers digging into the flesh.

"I could almost kill him for that!" he snarled.

The cache diminished quickly. All that remained of the bulky pile in a few minutes more were a few scattered bales, lying on the floor at the far end of the room. Corporal Rand and Dick were waiting impatiently for the completion of the task, when suddenly the policeman's sharp intake of breath drew the other's attention.

"Shades of Lucifer!" gasped the corporal. "Look at that!"

At first Dick did not understand, but presently he saw the cause of the corporal's excitement. A low cry of admiration escaped his own lips.

"Why—why, it's Toma! The nerve of him! Can you imagine anything more foolhardy?"

Toma it was—Toma, sober and unconcerned as ever. In the guise of a packer, he had joined the other half-breeds and Indians. He followed closely behind two strapping natives, picked up a bale of fur and walked out with it. Twice more in the next few minutes he repeated this performance. On his third trip, however, all the fur had been removed. La Qua and a somewhat short and corpulent half-breed of indeterminate age were the only occupants of the room. These two looked up, as if resenting Toma's intrusion. Then they sprang back, hands high in the air, as a dangerous-looking automatic seemed to leap into the young guide's hand. Calmly, Toma ordered the two men back against the wall and disarmed them.

Dick followed Rand and the two stormed through the door, revolvers in readiness. They called out to Toma not to shoot. The corporal yanked down a coil of rope from a peg on the wall and proceeded to bind the outlaws, at the same time ordering Dick to bolt and lock the door, then to release Richardson.

La Qua was pale with fury, swearing vengeance upon the police.

"Yuh can't get away with this," he snarled.

"You'll pay good an' plenty. Jus' remember that."

"I'm willing to answer for my conduct here," laughed Rand. "I'm not frightened."

Toma and Rand dragged the bodies across the floor, concealing them behind a pile of blankets. Then they turned to examine the sergeant.

His injuries were not serious. Already he showed signs of returning consciousness. Rand brought water and bathed and dressed the wound with a skill and precision that struck Dick's admiration.

Someone pounded on the door. Drawing his revolver, the policeman hurried over, shot the bolt, swung open the door, concealing himself behind it. A tall, fierce-visaged man stepped into the room, demanding harshly:

"Who locked this door? Where's La Qua? The boys are ready to start."

Instantly he perceived that he had committed a blunder. Dick and Toma he had never seen before. Slightly puzzled, he took one step forward, when he felt the steel muzzle of Rand's revolver poking him in the ribs.

"Stand right where you are," said the corporal pleasantly. "Glad you came in. Permit me to relieve you of your hardware."

One glance into the steady eyes, a look at the familiar uniform, and the intruder saw the futility of resistance. Yet there was bluster in his voice.

"What does this mean?"

"It means that the fun's over," Rand stated evenly. "Stand right where you are! So the pack-train's ready to start?"

The prisoner made no reply. Tall, sullen, resentful—unflinchingly he met the cool gray eyes of the mounted policeman.

"Come, speak up! I mean business!" Rand shoved his revolver into the man's ribs again. There was nothing pleasant about his voice now.

"They're ready tuh start if yuh want to know," begrudgingly answered the outlaw.

"Are you heading straight for the pass?"

Again the hesitation. Again the revolver fondling the man's ribs.

"Yep."

"All right," said Rand, cooly deliberate. "You can go out and tell them to start. Tell them La Qua is ready."

The prisoner stared.

"Go out. Yuh mean that?"

"Yes, but not alone. I'll go with you. I'll be standing right behind you when you give them those orders. But before we go, you might as well understand that there's to be no trickery. No treachery. It might prove fatal."

Rand opened the door, making a gesture with one arm.

"Out of here—and watch your step! I'll have my gun on you every minute!"

The door closed softly. The sound of retreating footsteps, a pregnant silence—a period of waiting which seemed interminable. Then the door opened again and Rand and the prisoner appeared. In the eyes of the policeman there sparkled a triumphant light. He turned to Dick with a smile.

"They've gone. Never suspected anything. Told them that La Qua and our friend here would follow at their leisure. Bring me the rest of that rope, Toma."

They trussed the man and dragged him back to the far corner of the room to keep company with La Qua. Again they stood in front of Richardson, who lay with half-closed eyes. He had not yet recovered consciousness. Rand spoke quickly:

"We haven't a minute to lose. Every moment counts. Toma, I'm going to ask you to remain here to guard these prisoners while I hurry on after the pack-train. You, Dick, will return to Sandy and conduct him here. As soon as you do that, Sandy will relieve Toma. In another hour or two, Richardson will be able to sit up. It won't be long before he recovers completely. You and Toma are to follow and overtake me. I may need your help. Think you'll be able to follow our tracks, Toma?"

"No trouble do that," nodded the guide. "We find 'em all right."

Dick found Sandy without much difficulty. His chum was shivering from the cold. Also he had

grown impatient and resentful, as his first words indicated.

"Well, did you finally consent to come back and let me know how things are? I was just getting ready to leave this place. Surely, the corporal didn't expect me to stay here all night."

"I'm sorry, Sandy," placated Dick. "We couldn't get here any sooner. Too bad you're cold." His voice rose animatedly. "And good news! We've found Richardson and have taken three prisoners—one of them La Qua. Rand is following the pack-train in the direction of the pass. We must hurry."

"Whew! Good work! I suppose you're one of the heroes."

"No such luck," Dick replied. "I didn't do a thing. All the credit is due Rand and Toma. Both were wonderful. I'll tell you about it sometime. But now we must hurry. Toma and I are to follow Rand. You're to remain with Richardson and the prisoners in the cabin."

"Suits me," Sandy's teeth chattered. "Hope it's warm over there. I've caught a chill. Anyway, good luck to you, Dick. When do you think you'll be back?"

"Don't know. It's a long way to the coast. Hundreds of miles, I guess."

"The coast!" almost shrieked Sandy.

"Yes," returned Dick a little proudly, "we're going straight through to the Pacific!"

CHAPTER XIII

A SCOUT RETURNS

CONTRARY to Dick's expectations, Sandy did not resent being left behind. True, the young Scotchman had experienced a certain amount of regret to learn that he was to be separated from his two chums and miss the excitement and adventure of the western trip, yet this feeling passed quickly. In spite of his occasional rebellious mood and seeming stubbornness, Sandy was really a philosopher. His grumbling and complaining seldom were taken seriously. Under the surface, somewhere deep down within him, were the flowing springs of an unconquerable good nature.

He knew that it was necessary for someone to stay with Sergeant Richardson and the prisoners, and he accepted Rand's orders unhesitatingly. Even if he couldn't go along with Dick and Toma, he could at least prove his worth in other ways. He'd see this thing through to the finish.

Shortly after the two boys had left, Sergeant Richardson completely recovered consciousness. It was not long before he sat up and began to ask

questions. He smiled a little wanly when he had been informed of Corporal Rand's successful strategy.

"I'm glad they got La Qua. Tomorrow, Sandy, we'll take these prisoners back to Wandley's post. Perhaps we can find a place where we can lock them up. I'll put a man in charge."

"Good idea," approved Sandy. "It isn't far from here. At the same time, we can find out how Pearly is getting on."

Later, the policeman walked over, a little unsteadily, to the corner where the prisoners lay.

"Well, La Qua, I'm glad to see you here. Have you anything to say for yourself?"

Apparently, he had. He immediately broke forth in a storm of invective that scorched the already overheated room. Sandy's ears fairly tingled as he listened to the horrible oaths and scathing denouncement.

"Mebbe yuh got me now," he snarled, concluding his tirade, "but yuh ain't finished with me yet. The knock on the head yuh got a while back won't be nothin' compared to what's coming to yuh. Yuh ain't got no call to meddle in honest men's business."

"Honest men!" gasped the sergeant, plainly taken aback. "Honest men," he repeated, staring in a sort of grim fascination at the row of evil faces in front of him. "Why, my good fellow, I wish you'd

explain one or two things to my satisfaction. I wish—"

Sandy's roar of laughter interrupted him. La Qua seized the opportunity to declare venomously:

"I don't need to explain nothin'. If one or two o' your men got hurt, it's all on account o' their meddling."

The policeman saw the folly of further argument. He turned back to where Sandy stood.

"Let's try to find something to eat," he proposed. "A hot cup of tea would go well right now. I'm famished. After we've eaten, you can roll in, Sandy, while I stand guard."

"That's mighty kind of you, sergeant, but I don't think I'll accept. You need the rest more than I do."

Richardson smiled and patted Sandy's thatch of yellow hair.

"All right, if you insist. I'll agree to take advantage of your offer, but only on one condition."

"What's that?" Sandy asked wonderingly.

"That you wake me up in three hours' time. A sort of compromise, you see. In that way we'll both get a little rest."

"I'll accept your terms," said Sandy with great solemnity.

A search in the cupboard behind the fireplace was rewarded by the discovery of a small container, full of tea, sugar in an earthen jar, and a stack of doubt-

ful-looking bannock, piled high on a granite plate. A kettle was soon simmering over the fire.

When they had eaten, Richardson arose and, walking over, inquired if any of the prisoners wanted refreshments. La Qua spurned the offer with a hair-burning oath. The others were more tractable. Yes, they were hungry. They would consider it a great favor if monsieur would do as he said.

Without a moment's hesitation, the policeman unbound the arms of the three men, while Sandy brought tea and bannock. Later, he even permitted one of the half-breeds to smoke. Then he bound them up again.

Long before the coming of daylight, the party started back on the trail to Wandley's. Arriving there without incident, four hours later, Sandy and Richardson were considerably startled when the door opened and a stalky, well-knit figured emerged.

"As I live," shouted Sandy, "Malemute Slade! Where did you come from?"

They shook hands with the police scout, beaming over the good fortune that had brought them together.

"Yeh, Sandy, I kind o' thought it was about time to come mushin' in. Been up in the foothills fer nearly three weeks. But by the looks o' it, I'm two days late. Wished I'd been here when that Nitchie took his shot at Pearly."

He paused as his gaze wandered in the direction of the prisoners.

"Sufferin' pole-cats! What's all this scum?"

Malemute Slade's critical eye ran over them, seeming to measure each in turn.

"Fine specimens, ain't they?" he rumbled on, half to himself. "Looks like the scourings from Hades. There ain't a single one o' them I'd trust any further than I could see. But where did yuh get 'em all, sergeant? An' why did yuh leave the hungriest wolf of 'em all scot free?"

"You mean Murky?"

"Yeh."

Richardson smiled.

"As a matter of fact, Slade, we're not quite ready for him yet. We haven't a thing thus far we can use as evidence against him. We wouldn't have taken these men here either, if there had been any way of getting around it. We won't press charges against any of them until we have secured the fur which was cached over there at Settlement Mountain."

"So yuh found the cache?"

"Yes," answered Richardson. "I'll tell you about it presently. But first, give me a hand to look after these men."

As he spoke, the policeman jerked his head in the direction of the door. A steady stream of the curious were pouring out. An inquisitive throng soon

gathered around them. On every side rose guttural exclamations, accompanied by much chattering and shaking of heads. Attracted by the commotion, Wandley himself appeared presently.

"Why, hello, sergeant!" he hailed the policeman. "What's up? Bring your men inside."

Richardson drew the free trader aside and a whispered consultation ensued. At its conclusion, Wandley led the way to a small building, which had previously been used for storing fur, but which, during recent years, had become too small to accommodate the trader's growing business.

"You can fit up this place to suit yourself. It's strongly built and will probably serve your purpose. I have a padlock inside for the door."

It was not long before La Qua and his followers were locked up and a guard, recruited from the crowd, stationed just outside. Then Sandy accompanied Malemute Slade and Richardson to Pearly's room. The wounded man smiled cheerfully as they entered.

Sandy was overjoyed at the remarkable change in Pearly's appearance. Although still running a high fever, he had taken a turn for the better. The greatest danger had passed. Sergeant Richardson stood near the bed but did not speak. A deep hush had fallen over the room. Suddenly the grizzled veteran of a hundred trails put out one hand and permitted

it to rest for one brief moment upon the wounded man's head. That was all. But many of the harsh lines in the face of the police sergeant had softened. Silently he turned away, motioning to Slade and Sandy to follow him. They repaired to the room, which had been placed at their disposal. Closing the door after him, Richardson lost no time in getting down to business.

"You asked me, Slade, where we got our prisoners. Over at Murky's cache. We had a little trouble there. If you'll listen closely I'll give you full particulars of the affair."

When the policeman had finished his narrative, Sandy noted the impression it had made upon the scout. Malemute's eyes were shining with excitement.

"So that's where Murky had his cache. Yuh can believe it or not, sergeant, but I passed that place not more than two days ago. I didn't see nothin' that looked suspicious. Mebbe it was a good thing I didn't stop to investigate. It might o' spoiled ever'thing. So Rand is followin' the pack-train through Blind Man's Pass? Can yuh beat that? Here I've been searchin' fer nearly a month an' couldn't find it."

Sergeant Richardson drummed softly on the table. He looked up and smiled.

"Unless I'm badly mistaken, the exact location of the pass will soon be public property. Perhaps to-

morrow by this time, Rand and the two boys will have entered it."

"Wish I was with them, sergeant."

"You can go later. Just now I have other work for you."

"You mean the prisoners?"

"Yes."

"Want me to take 'em back to Mackenzie barracks?"

"They'll be safer there," nodded the sergeant.

"You're goin' out after Murky then, eh?"

"No. Rand may have more to do than he's bargained for. I think I'll take Sandy here and set out after them. Murky will have to wait. I don't believe he'll attempt to escape. He'll probably stay over at Good Faith for a few weeks longer."

"Few weeks!" sputtered Malemute. "Why, he ain't there right now!"

"Isn't there!"

"No. When I come in a while ago, Wandley told me he'd seen Murky again jes' a few hours before."

"Great Scott! Then he didn't go back to Fort Good Faith after all."

"Don't see how he could."

"But which way did he go? Did you hear?"

"Wandley didn't seem to know. If anyone was to ask me fer an opinion, I'd say he's out scouting fer more fur."

Richardson rose thoughtfully to his feet and

walked over to the window. The bleak, cheerless landscape met his gaze. Sandy, who had a good view of the policeman's face, saw the jaw set grimly.

"I may be able to pick up a trace of him somewhere during the next few days. Of course, that means that my trip through the pass must be postponed for a short time."

He turned and smiled at Sandy.

"While I'm out making my investigations, you'd better stay right here. If you wish, upon my return, you can accompany me on the journey."

"I'll wait for you, sergeant. I'm anxious to go through Blind Man's Pass and join Dick and Toma." Then more plaintively: "You won't change your mind, will you?"

Both Richardson and Malemute Slade laughed at the young man's earnestness.

"No, Sandy, a promise is a promise. I'll not go back on my word." Richardson turned and addressed Slade. "You'd better make arrangements to take the prisoners over to barracks as quickly as possible. I'd suggest that you start tomorrow."

"I'll start this afternoon if you say the word, sergeant."

"No. You need a few hours in which to rest up. Tomorrow will do almost as well."

With a nod and a smile for both of them, the policeman turned quickly and strode out of the room.

CHAPTER XIV

FOLLOWING THE PACK-TRAIN

THROUGH an opaque darkness filled with the oppressive silence of Arctic night, Dick and Toma made their way. A few stars had come out like wayward wanderers. On every side were gray, unfamiliar shapes. Objects were shadowy and indistinct. Wolves and coyotes made the only sound heard across that weird and mysterious wilderness.

"We ought to find him pretty soon, Toma," Dick broke forth. "We've been travelling for an hour now, and I'm sure we've been making better progress than the pack-train."

They came to the foot of a slope and started up, side by side, their moccasined feet swishing through the freshly fallen snow. Gaining the summit of the hill, they paused for breath. Then the quick ears of the guide, straining always for some sound that might be significant, detected a faint rustling ahead.

"I hear him. We go careful now. Mebbe him Corporal Rand. But no take chances. Not always be too sure."

Rand it was. He stood waiting for them, one

hand on his hip, the other raised in a warning gesture.

"They're ahead—not more than a few rods. Listen, and you can hear them."

"Yes, I can hear something," whispered Dick. "Did you think we were never coming, corporal?"

"As a matter of fact," Rand answered him, "I didn't expect you for another half hour. You've made good time."

The three started forward slowly, keeping always within sound of the cavalcade in front. Sometimes they approached so closely that they could hear the voices of the packers and occasionally the snarling of the dogs. Soon they had learned something of importance: La Qua's pack-train consisted both of ponies and dog teams. There were seven or eight horses, in addition to four teams of huskies.

"You see," explained Rand, "La Qua was in a predicament. The snow storm interfered with his plans. His original intention, evidently, was to take only pack-horses. The heavy snow made this inadvisable. But he didn't have as many dog teams as he required to move away the cache. So he was forced to use the ponies as well."

Just before daybreak, the pack-train halted in the lee of a small mountain. From a position a few hundred yards away, concealed by rocks, Rand and the two boys watched it. Breakfast was soon in progress. Smoke curled up from several camp-

fires. It was not an altogether unpleasant scene and Dick's mouth watered at the thought of the nourishing meal, piping hot, the outlaws would presently sit down to. He even imagined he could smell the appetizing odor of frying bacon and the pungent aroma of coffee. A little crestfallen, he nibbled at his own emergency rations, huddling down against a flat surface of rock.

Later, Dick looked out again, eyes bleared and bloodshot. Every muscle in his body ached. Lack of sleep had induced a strange condition—an overpowering lassitude he could not shake off. The rustling of a pine tree near by had become a sing-song, half-musical chant, which momentarily grew louder. His vision played him false. Objects around him were distorted, sometimes grotesque. His mind had lost its function. Nothing was real. Nothing mattered. He fell asleep, sitting up—a sleep so sound, so intense, so deep that Rand saw the uselessness of attempting to wake him.

When he recovered consciousness, he heard the corporal speaking:

"He's coming to, Toma. Give him another shake."

Dick stared about him guiltily. He surmised that he had slept only a few minutes but the sight of the round orb of the sun, high above the horizon, quickly disillusioned him.

"Why—why didn't you wake me?" he gasped.

"How long have I been here? What time is it, corporal?"

"Nine o'clock. You've slept four hours."

"I did?" Dick's eyes were wide with dismay.

"Yes, you did. But don't think I blame you," Rand laughed. "You couldn't help it. It was inevitable. No person can manage without sleep. I had a little doze myself. We can't lose the pack-train now. It will be easy to follow their tracks in broad daylight. We'll catch up to them again before nightfall."

All day they travelled, passing through a country of hills and rocks, with mountain peaks towering above them. The summits of the mountains were lost in an enveloping, vaporous mist. Shaggy heights were resplendent in rainbow garb. The deep brown of rock surfaces was a decided contrast to the scintillating white of the trail.

Late in the afternoon the tracks led them across a wind-swept plateau, thence down to a narrow defile which ran uninterruptedly westward for a distance of four or five miles. As they approached its end, Corporal Rand was surprised into a quick ejaculation.

"Can't see how we can get out of this. Surely they didn't climb those slippery rocks."

A few yards further on, they found the solution to the mystery. On the left they saw an opening in

the rocks, scarcely more than four feet wide—in reality a wide crack that split the immense formation of rock from top to bottom. Passing through it, they emerged into what appeared to be a wide valley, stretching far ahead. The corporal gasped in amazement. Dick stood bewildered. Even Toma so far forgot himself as to cry out in wonder.

"Blind Man's Pass!" exclaimed the two boys.

"Blind Man's Pass," replied the policeman. "At last a reality! Wonderful! I can scarcely credit my senses. Beautiful, isn't it, Dick?"

Dick nodded. "I was never more astonished in my life. No wonder the entrance to the pass is so hard to find. Even now I doubt if I could go back eight or ten miles and find my way here again."

A strange far-away look flecked the eyes of the policeman. He glanced up at the receding walls of the valley. Up, up, up, hundreds, thousands of feet through an amber haze of sunlight, streaked here and there with bright tints and shades. Magic seemed to touch everything. Dick was obsessed with a sense of unreality, of majestic heights, of vague distances.

Along the comparatively level floor of the valley lay only a few inches of snow. The tracks of the pack-train could easily be seen. They were not difficult to follow. There was no danger now of wandering afield and losing their bearings. The mountains shut them in—completely encompassed them.

Neither they nor the outlaws could clamber up the unscalable heights.

Their onward trek had assumed something of the nature of an outing, a mysterious adventure through unfamiliar scenes. In the hours that passed never once did Dick lose interest in his surroundings. Sleep had revived him and his spirits had risen accordingly. He and his two companions hurried on, conversing as gaily as if they were going to a holiday festival.

Day ended with startling suddenness. But the gloomy, threatening darkness of the preceding night did not come. It was more radiant, softly nocturnal —a half-moon riding across a bedecked, star-sprinkled sky. Crackling northern lights. Clear, crisp, exhilarating air. The only obscurities lay along the shadowed walls of the valley, in the deep recesses and fissures of the rocks.

Day after day, they fared westward amid scenes of grandeur and magnificence. Never did they approach closer than a mile or two to the outlaws. At night very often they could see twinkling campfires ahead. Frequently, on clear days, they perceived the pack-train itself—tiny black dots, crawling like ants over sugar or white sand. Once, climbing to the commanding position of a huge crag, for nearly an hour Dick watched the progress of the cavalcade.

Outside of these minor incidents, there was little of importance to distinguish one day from another.

Fortunately, there had been no marked change in the weather. They were forced to conserve their supplies, but now and again ptarmigan were secured, making a much appreciated change in the monotony of their diet. On the morning of the tenth day the valley widened out and by evening they had made their way out of the pass into a country of rugged and broken contours. Soon the forest encroached. Then the topography of the land became less undulating, less forbidding. In the breath of the wind they could smell the unmistakable tang of the Pacific. It was shortly after this that a most mysterious incident occured.

It was afternoon, of a calm, sunshiny day, and only a few hours previous they had picked up a well-marked trail, leading to the westward. The pack-train—they had good reason to believe—was less than a mile ahead; and Dick and his two companions were moving along slowly, when, unexpectedly to their right, scarcely a hundred yards back from the trail, they perceived a log cabin. Upon closer approach, they saw that the place was inhabited. A thin spiral of smoke curled up from the mud chimney. Outside, stretched on convenient drying-frames, were pelts of various wild animals.

Invariably cautious, Rand decided not to go in, even though his visit might have been rewarded by a goodly supply of fresh meat.

"I hate to risk it," he informed the boys. "No

telling who lives there. I've no desire to advertise my presence. We'd better conquer our curiosity and our appetites and keep right on."

They were now directly opposite the cabin. Dick and Toma turned longing eyes in its direction.

"Look! Ponies!" exclaimed Toma.

"Where?" sharply demanded Rand.

The guide pointed. Back in the heavy underbrush, near the edge of a natural clearing, were three ponies staked out in the snow. The policeman's face instantly became serious, though for what reason Dick could not decide. From that moment, he grew more and more thoughtful. Once or twice, as Dick looked his way, he saw Rand shake his head. But in the interest of new scenes, Dick quickly forgot the incident. It was fully an hour later before it was brought again to his attention.

"Queer thing about those ponies," Rand mused aloud. "Seldom that these trappers keep any around. It puzzles me."

"It does seem strange," agreed Dick. "Can't imagine what use a trapper would have for them."

A few miles farther on they passed a second cabin, almost identical to the first. Here too was the same phenomenon—except that at this place there were two ponies instead of three. So amazed was Rand that he stopped short and scratched his head in perplexity.

"This is a new one on me," he scowled. "I've

travelled thousands of miles through the North, met every type of trapper, both Indians and white men, but this is the first time I have ever witnessed this incongruity. Trappers with ponies! Dog teams—yes! But ponies never! Can you explain it, Toma?"

"No. I not understand, corporal."

Twice, during the next two days, the incident was repeated. They passed other trappers' shacks where there were ponies. However, now the thing had become such a commonplace occurrence that they ceased to marvel at it. New interests occupied their attention. The trail had widened and had become almost a road. Indian villages were passed. They saw totem poles. They crossed a river. Obliterated now were the tracks of the pack-train. More and more traffic with each succeeding day. One morning Dick made a suggestion.

"Don't you think we ought to hurry along and catch up to them, corporal? They may be travelling faster now and may give us the slip. We can slow down again as soon as we catch sight of them."

"Good idea," responded Rand.

There ensued a long period of forced marching, during which the little party hardly took time to eat or sleep. Hour after hour, they hurried on. The pace began to tell. Nearly fifty-four hours later, climbing to a height of land, they saw stretching out before them, perhaps not more than ten miles away,

the huge, broad expanse of the ocean. But nowhere along the trail ahead was there a sign of the pack-train. Corporal Rand's face shadowed with apprehension.

"Something mighty queer about this," he pronounced. "I can't understand it. I'm beginning to feel like a fool."

"But what do you mean, corporal?"

"The pack-train—" the policeman's voice caught.

"Yes. Yes," persisted Dick. "What about it?"

Rand rubbed a hand across his troubled forehead.

"Just this, Dick: I can't believe that the outlaws have been able to gain so quickly on us. I wonder what has happened."

"They must be ahead somewhere. We've followed them all the way. They couldn't just disappear in thin air."

Before replying, the corporal brushed the snow from a flat rock and sat down.

"That's the natural hypothesis. But the facts don't seem to bear it out."

"You mean—"

"I mean," said the policeman, "that we've been hoodwinked. They've contrived somehow to give us the slip. I'm positive we won't find them ahead. Do you suppose we passed their camp during the night?"

CHAPTER XV

THE CORPORAL UPBRAIDS HIMSELF

During the ensuing consultation there appeared to be a diversity of opinion. Toma thought that they ought to retrace their steps in an attempt to find out where the outlaws had turned off the trail, while Dick still held to the belief that the pack-train must be somewhere ahead. As for Rand, he did not immediately declare himself. Sitting on the rock, his chin resting in his hands, he was immersed in deep thought. Nearly ten minutes elapsed before he looked up and addressed his two companions.

"I might as well be perfectly frank. I'm stuck. I must confess that I don't know where the pack-train is. It may be behind or it may be ahead. If they—the outlaws—are ahead, I will say they've been moving faster than at any time since we left Settlement Mountain."

Dick stood impatiently, hands on hips, one moccasined foot tracing patterns and queer hieroglyphics in the soft snow at the side of the trail. Toma's face was inscrutable. What lay behind his mask-like features no one might guess. Another interval of

silence—of inactivity. Finally Rand rose to his feet.

"We'll go on," came his decision. "I doubt if we'll find them ahead, but we can search for the cabin in which the furs are stored. The cache must be there somewhere."

Later in the day, they came out upon a tree-covered plain close to the Pacific. They camped within a thick shelter of pines, rolled in their blankets, and on the following morning inaugurated a careful, painstaking search.

Weary and discouraged, almost out of food, at the end of the second day they found themselves on the south side of a tiny inlet.

"We seem to be getting nowhere," Rand confessed. "I believe now that if there is a cache, it's farther back from the coast. We'll skirt this inlet and then return inland to see if by any chance we can find a trace of the pack-train."

Doggedly, in silence, the boys trailed along after Rand. Half an hour later they broke through a tangle of underbrush to a clearing beyond. Their hearts leaped with joy. Built out from the shore was a crudely constructed landing wharf, fashioned entirely from pine and spruce timbers with a covering of hewed poles. Close to the wharf—and what struck their attention still more forcibly—stood a large log building without windows—and with only one door. It was a warehouse—nothing else! Probably the cache itself!

"Hurray!" shouted Dick, as he broke into a run. "We've found it!"

They brought up before the door of the building, panting breathlessly. The door was padlocked. In feverish haste, Toma secured a couple of sharp rocks and commenced hammering upon the clasp. Rand was smiling now for the first time in many hours. When the efforts of Toma had been rewarded, he stepped forward and yanked open the barrier.

"Murky Nichols has been storing fur in here for the past three or four years," he told the boys. "This will be the largest cache of stolen fur ever seized by the police. It will mark the end of a series of lawless depredations by the cleverest gang of crooks that has ever operated in the North."

When he had ceased speaking, the corporal stepped inside. The place was dank, dark, evil-smelling. It was impossible to see anything. Standing just behind him, Toma struck a match. The tiny flame flared up, but failed to light the mysterious, dark recesses of the room. Dick and Toma alternated in lighting matches. They pushed their way farther into the darkness, groping about like ghouls in some subterranean passage.

Moisture had sprung out upon Dick's forehead. He was trembling and hot. Each tiny taper carried them farther and farther on their round of explora-

tion. Finally, Corporal Rand stopped short and threw up his hands in an exasperated gesture.

"Shades of a purple skunk!" he cried out angrily. "There's nothing here! Pshaw! The place is as clean and bare as Mother Hubbard's cupboard."

The disappointment succeeding this announcement was keen. Dick's shoulders slumped and his head drooped as he turned dejectedly and made his way back to the door. Toma was the only one who had anything to say.

"I tell you something, corporal. Mebbe no fur here now, but all same Murky Nichols use this place to make 'em cache. I know that."

"How do you know it?" growled Dick.

"I tell by smell," answered the guide.

"He's right," broke forth the corporal. "Fur has been stored here. I can detect a familiar odor myself."

"But how do you explain it?" asked Dick. "You were under the impression that Nichols had a two-year supply of stolen fur here. What has become of it?"

"Unfortunately, I'm no wizard," Rand answered a little testily, "or I might be able to answer your question. All I know is that Nichols has been shipping fur for the last three or four years. As I told you once before, we believe that a large shipment was taken from here to Seattle by someone, who

either purchased the fur in good faith or who is a confederate of Murky's. Perhaps this person comes up here oftener than we surmised. It may be that he has just recently cleaned out this cache and will return later for the fur now being brought here by pack-train. Of only one thing am I reasonably sure, and that is that this is the place where Nichols sends his shipments."

"If we wait here, pretty soon pack-train will come. What you think?" Toma raised questioning eyes to the mounted policeman.

"Yes," said Rand, "the pack-train will come here. We can't miss it."

"But what I don't understand," Dick spoke hesitatingly, "is why the outlaws haven't arrived days ago. They were ahead of us when we started. Now we're ahead of them. How do you explain it, corporal?"

"I can think of only one explanation. The boat from Seattle may not be due here for a week or two. In the interim, the outlaws are putting up somewhere along the trail, where there are better facilities for feeding the men and caring for the dogs and ponies. We must have passed them in the dark."

"What will we do?" asked Dick. "Go back and try to find them or stay here?"

Rand made his decision promptly. "We might as

well stay here. They'll have to come sooner or later. All we can do now is to wait."

Considerably cheered, the three walked out of the building and made their way over to the landing wharf. As they stood there, a disconcerting thought occurred to Dick.

"The outlaws will be sure to see our tracks around the warehouse when they come with the fur," he pointed out.

"Don't worry about that," said Rand. "They don't know yet that they've been followed by the police. I doubt if they have a single suspicion. However, when we go back, we'd better repair the damage to the lock and door."

Standing there, Dick half-expected to see at any moment a vessel round the heavily wooded point and come steaming toward them. He thought about the boat from Seattle. Wouldn't it be great sport if the ship would arrive ahead of its schedule? If this happened, would they drop anchor in the deep waters of the inlet and wait for the coming of the outlaws? What action would Rand take? Would he attempt to capture the vessel, or would he fall back out of sight to lay in concealment until the arrival of the pack-train?

The first light of oncoming dawn struck Dick's eyes on the following morning when he peeped out from between his Hudson's Bay blankets. It was

really still too early to get up and it provoked him to find that he had awakened so soon. Neither Toma nor the corporal would be astir for another two hours. What had aroused him? He sat up impatiently, tucked the blankets around his feet. Then he heard a voice:

"What a fool I am. I must be suffering from a mental relapse. What is the matter with me? A blind bat! A nincompoop! Honestly, I need a guardian."

The assertions were made with such deliberateness, with such sincerity, that Dick grinned in spite of himself. He turned his head quickly in the direction of Rand's bed and discovered that person sitting up like himself, and staring moodily out through the thick obstruction of trees. Rand's back was towards him. Apparently, the policeman believed that his remarks had fallen upon heedless ears. Naturally he supposed that the boys still slept.

"What's wrong, corporal?" pleasantly inquired the eavesdropper.

Rand started and half-turned. His manner was a little sheepish, like that of a boy caught in some foolish prank.

"So you heard me?" Rand turned completely around and grinned. "Well, anyway, you know now what I think of myself. When you have finished dressing, Dick, come and clout me over the head. You have my permission. I've been guilty of blith-

ering idiocy. How I ever contrived to persuade the R. N. W. M. P. to take me into the service will always remain an unsolved mystery."

Dick laughed outright. "I don't think you do yourself justice, corporal. What makes you say that?"

"My conscience hurts me. I'm an ass. When I awoke about twenty minutes ago, it suddenly dawned on me how completely we've been fooled."

"By whom?" inquired Dick, wondering if the policeman had taken leave of his senses.

"By the outlaws."

"You mean when they gave us the slip?"

"Yes. That's it exactly."

"That wasn't your fault. We've been careful enough."

Corporal Rand threw back his blankets and commenced to dress.

"Do you remember, Dick," he resumed, "when we passed the first trapper's shack on the trail this side of Dominion Range, and Toma called our attention to the three ponies?"

Dick nodded.

"You may recall," Rand went on, "that the presence of the ponies there puzzled me. Subsequently the thing was repeated at other trappers' cabins along the route we were travelling. Now, as I look back upon it all, I'm ashamed of my stupidity. I should have known right away what was taking place."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you."

"The ponies were part of the pack-train. The furs were unloaded at various places along the line. As the pack-train progressed, it became smaller, until, finally, nothing was left of it. That explains many things. It explains why we have been unable to overtake the outlaws. Murky's precious shipment is scattered along the trail over a distance of twenty miles."

"What a trick!" Dick exclaimed. "Pretty clever ruse, wasn't it? The outlaws must have known all the time that we were following them. It took a genius to think of a plan like that."

"I don't believe they knew we were following them," stated the corporal. "It's probably the usual procedure, inaugurated by Murky himself. Nichols does not feel safe with all of his eggs in one basket. He doesn't believe in taking unnecessary risks. The trappers who live along the trail, where we saw the ponies, are probably in his employ—really not trappers at all. They guard the caches of stolen fur."

Rand paused for a moment, then continued:

"Do you remember, Dick, how many of those trappers' shacks there were where we saw ponies?"

"Three," answered Dick quickly.

"But we went past several where we saw none. Do you recall whether there were dogs around these places?"

"Yes, I believe so."

Rand mumbled something which Dick did not catch. Then—

"Well, I've come to this conclusion: Those five or six places harbour the outlaws—all of them, every member of the pack-train. I'm convinced that if we went back there tomorrow we'd also find the fur."

"If Murky has five or six separate caches, why did he build the warehouse?"

"Couldn't very well get along without it. Consider his position. The boat from Seattle may on occasion be two or three days late. What is to be done with the fur? It is too valuable to be piled up on the landing wharf in all kinds of weather. The warehouse would be—"

Corporal Rand did not complete the sentence. Dick had jumped to his feet and was waving his arms about wildly.

"There it comes! There it comes!" he shouted. "The boat! It has entered the inlet. Look, corporal!"

CHAPTER XVI

MURKY NICHOLS!

THE vessel came to anchor not far from the landing wharf. The throb of her engines ceased. Immaculate in fresh paint—a dull gray—she rode prettily in the water. Her graceful lines resembled those of a yacht. It was evident that she had been built for speed. Slung out over port and starboard, were two small boats, one of which, judging from the plaintive creaking of ropes, was about to be lowered. The three watched her for a while, endeavoring to make out some of the figures on board.

"She must be days ahead of her schedule," surmised Rand. "The outlaws would never have cached the fur along the line if they had known she was coming in so soon. What's that?"

They heard rather than saw the oncoming figure —someone trampling along through the brush. Then the newcomer broke into the clearing and for the first time his form stood revealed.

Dick's throat contracted. He shrank back against the thicket, reaching out for support. A faintly audible exclamation rose to his lips.

"Murky Nichols!"

The silence that fell over the little party was so deep, so breathless that they could hear the thicket rustling in the faint breeze. Corporal Rand stared at Dick, and that young man returned the gaze with an expression that was indescribable. Toma whispered hoarsely:

"How him get here? I thought he go back to Fort Good Faith."

"Apparently not!" Rand gritted from between set teeth. "A ruse, a trick—he's full of them. One never knows what Nichols is planning, or where he is likely to be at any stated time. He bobs up everywhere. It has always been difficult to follow his movements. He's here now. It's something I hadn't bargained for."

The lanky, indolent figure slumped past the warehouse, heading for the wharf. A gray felt hat was pulled down over his forehead, the brim almost resting upon his shaggy eyebrows. Reaching his objective, he pulled a knife and plug of tobacco from his pocket and lazily sliced off a generous hunk. Having completed this important operation, he glanced up, slowly raised his arm and began signalling the vessel.

There sounded the creaking of hawsers, then a low splash as the boat hit the water. Two men, one of them in a blue cap and uniform, rowed for the shore. They reached the landing wharf, clambering up with the assistance of Murky.

Although they could see everything that happened, Rand and the two boys were unable to catch more than a low murmur of sound coming from the conspirators. Once the voice of the man in uniform rose appreciably, but even then they could not catch what was said.

"I'd give my right arm to be able to sit under that wharf and listen to them," Rand whispered eagerly.

"What you think them fellows do?" Toma wished to know.

"Can't imagine. Something's up. I wonder why Murky didn't bring along his pack-train. What's the reason for the delay?"

Scarcely had the words left the policeman's mouth, when he jumped back, nerves taut, eyes shining. A perfect bedlam of sound arose. It drifted across to them through the trees, disturbing the stillness, the calm of the forest's solitude. They could hear the voices of men, the whinnying of ponies, the guttural shouts of packers, the swishing and snapping of underbrush. Dick seized Toma's arm and held it in a vice-like grip. In a sort of stupor, he noticed that Rand was filling a rifle-clip with cartridges. The pack-train came into view at the edge of the clearing—ten horses, four dog teams and six men. They gathered about the warehouse, a confused mass of horses, dogs and men, seeming to hesitate, in reality waiting for a signal from Nichols.

It was a crucial moment. Dick knew that the time

had come for action, yet the thought terrified him. What chance had they against so many? Not counting Nichols, there were six of the outlaws and probably as many more sailors aboard the yacht. Chills, like tiny currents of ice, coursed down Dick's spine.

The policeman seemed to sense Dick's feelings, almost to read his thoughts. He reached over and patted the younger man affectionately on the shoulder.

"Don't worry, Dick, we'll come out all right. Just keep cool. You've been anxious to join the Royal Mounted—now show me the stuff you're made of. You too, Toma."

"Yes sir, corporal, I stick by you when we make 'em big fight. You just tell 'em Toma what to do."

"What's our first move?" asked Dick. "Do you intend to meet the outlaws face to face? Aren't there too many for us?"

"The best way to defeat a gang like this is to capture its leader. That's what I propose to do now. Murky Nichols is the man I want. He's the directing force here, the brains behind every move. The others are mere chessmen. He's the player. I intend to walk right over in the presence of every one of his men and take him prisoner."

"What!" gasped Dick.

"I can do it." Rand's voice was calm.

It was a breathless, incredible thing that Rand proposed. A desperate plan indeed—seemingly fool-

hardy! It required bravery of the deepest brand—nerves of steel and a courage that would never falter.

"You can't make it," almost whimpered Dick. "A bullet will bring you down before you go fifty yards."

"I don't think so," the corporal answered, only a slight tremor in his voice. "There's a psychology about this thing, Dick, that neither you nor I understand. At first, they'll be too startled to do anything. By the time they have recovered from their surprise, they won't be able to shoot without endangering the lives of Nichols and the two sailors. At any rate, I'm willing to take the chance."

"It isn't fair!" Dick protested hotly. "Why should you run all the risks alone? Corporal Rand, I won't permit it. If you're going to walk over there, I'm going with you."

The suspicion of a twinkle showed in Rand's unwavering gray eyes. But his voice was stern.

"Who's in command here?"

"Yes, I know," argued Dick. "But just the same—"

"You and Toma will stay here. That's final. By doing that, you can serve me better than by going along with me."

"How?"

"In various ways. I could tell you better if I knew exactly what is going to happen. I may not capture Nichols at all; he may capture me. If he

does, there is the chance that you may be able to rescue me. It may be that I am wrong too about the outlaws being too astonished to fire at me while I am crossing the clearing. If I am wrong, you may be able to draw their fire and give me a chance to escape."

Without once faltering, Corporal Rand struck boldly out into the clearing and headed straight for the wharf. His course would take him about forty yards west of the warehouse on the side opposite the door. The outlaws completely encircled the building. Dick thought at first that it was their purpose to unload the furs, placing them in the building, but on second thought, he realized that this would not be the case. With the yacht riding at anchor in the inlet, it stood to reason that the furs would be placed on the landing wharf, thereby saving a second handling. In fact, the corporal had proceeded scarcely twenty feet on his way, when Murky raised one arm as a signal for the pack-train to come closer. Fortunately, no one had as yet noticed the policeman.

Dick was rapidly losing control of his nerves. The tension was terrible. He experienced a feeling similar to that of being smothered under a blanket. His gaze was fairly riveted on the retreating figure. Every step that the corporal took positively hurt him.

He closed his eyes for a moment. He felt dizzy and weak. He could hear Toma's breathing—chok-

ing and asthmatic. He reached out and grabbed convulsively for a branch that drooped down in front of him. A wail of terror issued from his lips. A crash, a puff of smoke! Corporal Rand stumbled a little, as if his toe had caught in some obstruction underfoot. Dick saw Murky wheel in surprise, his hand fumbling at his belt, face white and tense. But Rand had already pulled his gun and though still thirty feet away, he had the drop on his opponent. Murky's hand and those of the two sailors went up, clawing the air. A few more steps, and Rand stood amongst them.

Murky shrieked out something in Cree, which resulted in immediate confusion around the warehouse. Packers sprang to their ponies, whips cracked—hurried calls and frenzied oaths. Figures darted back and forth as though daft. Presently out of the confusion came some semblance of order. The pack-train started away in full retreat—a retreat that was almost a rout.

Dick knew now what Murky's command had been: Unable to save himself, only one chance was left him—to send away the pack-train, to get rid of the tell-tale evidence. Occupied as he was, Corporal Rand was powerless to prevent it.

The packers had drawn their guns and were herding the ponies across the clearing, shouting hoarsely at the top of their lungs. Dick saw Toma leap past him, rifle held in readiness. For a split-second he stood

undecided, then he too turned and rushed frantically away to head off the retreating party. Panting, they circled around to the far side of the clearing, just as the head of the column entered the woods. Toma's rifle spurted fire and Dick followed his example. The rout became a stampede. Ponies broke away from their packers and rushed away at a mad gallop. Dog teams snarled and fought. Taken completely by surprise, the outlaws huddled together, firing volley after volley at the place where the boys lay concealed.

From that time on, at least as far as Dick was concerned, things became blurred, hazy—unreal. Bullets flew in the brush everywhere. The pack-train had stampeded, but the outlaws still remained. Most of Murky's adherents had now taken to cover and were offering a most stubborn resistance. It was plain that Dick and Toma had failed in their efforts.

There came suddenly a lull in the firing. In a choked, excited voice, Dick spoke to Toma:

"This is a terrible mess. We haven't succeeded in accomplishing anything. First thing we know, one of these outlaws will get a pot-shot at Rand—and then all will be over."

"Corporal no fool," Toma replied. "Things not so bad what you think. Here come policeman now."

It was true. With the prisoners walking ahead of him, Rand came straight toward the place of the re-

cent skirmish. This was the reason why the firing had ceased. The outlaws were waiting for Murky. As the policeman and his three prisoners came directly opposite Dick heard Rand giving orders. Then Nichols called out in a trembling voice:

"Come out of it, boys. It's all over. Come out, I tell yuh. If any o' yuh shoot, I'm a dead man!"

One or two at a time, the outlaws came out, dropped their guns and moved forward to Murky's side, hands held high. Seeing the turn affairs had taken, Dick and Toma also lost no time in joining the group.

"Well, Murky, I guess it's all over," Rand stated evenly. "We haven't seized your fur yet, but that won't take long. Have you anything to say for yourself?"

"Nothin' at all, corporal," Nichols answered insolently. "But mebbe we ain't through yet—you an' me."

Rand ignored the threat.

"You can dispatch two of your men to overtake the stampeded ponies and find the dog teams. Toma will go along with them."

Murky issued the orders, but the young guide stepped forward and exclaimed:

"Men not all here, corporal. First time over at warehouse I count six packers. Only four here."

Dick confirmed Toma's statement.

"That's right. There were six. I counted them myself. We'd better be careful."

"Is this true, Murky?" Rand scowled.

"Yep."

"Where are they?"

"How should I know? I wasn't here. Yuh oughta know that."

"You'll be responsible if anything happens," warned the policeman.

Not long afterward, Toma and two of the outlaws went out in search of the stampeded ponies, while Rand and Dick took the remaining men—with the exception of the uniformed sailor and Murky—and locked them in the warehouse. Then Rand turned to the officer in charge of the yacht:

"You'd better order your vessel in, captain."

"I'll try, but I don't know whether they'll come," trembled the sailor.

"They'll save themselves a lot of trouble if they do. I have the name and description of your vessel. Remember you're dealing with the Canadian government now."

But the captain was right. Signalling from the wharf proved of no avail. There came derisive shouts from the men aboard, and not long afterward the sailors hoisted the anchor and the yacht steamed out of the inlet.

CHAPTER XVII

DICK GOES TO THE RESCUE

The escape of the outlaws from the warehouse during the night was one of those regrettable happenings that come occasionally when least expected. On the following morning as Dick opened the door a deep silence greeted him. The prisoners had gone. Investigation showed that part of the flooring had been removed and that the outlaws had dug their way out during the night. The shock of this discovery staggered Dick, who lost no time in reporting to Constable Rand. The policeman received the news calmly.

"Well, there's no use worrying about it. I'm sorry, but it can't be helped. We have the ringleaders—which is much more important. The police will retake the others in the course of time. Right now, I'm worrying more about Toma and the packponies. What has become of the fur? If we lose the fur, we'll have no direct evidence against Murky."

"Why," said Dick in surprise, "I should think you could convict him easily. What about the shooting of Pearly and the assault upon Richardson?"

"True enough. But Murky didn't commit these crimes."

"No; but he ordered them done. He's the person responsible."

"Unfortunately, that may be rather hard to prove. It all depends upon what attitude the other outlaws take."

The forenoon was long and tedious. Lines of worry began to crease the corporal's forehead. Dick was driven to the verge of desperation. The pack-train had not yet returned. Sitting in front of the campfire, opposite the sailor and Nichols, with Rand pacing nervously back and forth behind him, Dick pictured a hundred imaginary perils and disasters that had befallen Toma. Sometimes he saw him languishing in a dark, foul room, suffering all the tortures of imprisonment; and again he visualized a limp, lifeless form, crumpled in the snow in the depth of some forest solitude, around him the leering, grinning faces of the outlaws. By three o'clock in the afternoon, Dick had become almost desperate. He rose to his feet and drew the corporal aside.

"I can't endure this much longer. Let's do something."

The policeman took the younger man's arm affectionately.

"What would you suggest?"

"I don't know," wailed Dick.

"There is only one thing that I can propose—and you may not like that."

"What is it?"

"You can stay here and watch these two vultures while I go out and try to find Toma."

Moisture had gathered in Dick's eyes. Through a glistening film, he looked up at the corporal.

"Will you let me go? This inactivity, this suspense is killing me by inches. Corporal, I'll promise to be very careful. But please let me go."

"All right, Dick, you can start. Take your blankets and a few supplies—if you can find any. If you have not discovered any trace of him by noon tomorrow, come back and report to me."

Dick lost no time in making his departure. All that afternoon he trudged through the snow, sometimes picking up the track of a pony and losing it again, on other occasions, coming across human footprints or the charred remains of a campfire. When darkness descended, he was miles back from the coast, with nothing more encouraging to buoy up his spirits than the thought that he must soon reach the main-travelled trail. His aching legs carried him along the slope of a hill—up, up interminably; then he struck out north by east in the direction he knew must eventually lead him to the place he sought. But as the miles slipped past, he grew so weary and footsore that he decided to make camp for the night. Just ahead he could see what ap-

peared to be the edge of a coulee—and he struggled on with the intention of entering it, thereby gaining protection from the chill, moist wind that blew in from the sea.

Imagine his surprise, upon approaching closer, to discover that it was not a coulee at all, but a deep-set basin, looking somewhat like the ancient bed of a lake. It was nearly three miles across, several hundred feet deep, and thickly overgrown with red willow. Near its center, he saw the twinkling light of a cabin.

An hour later, he approached the cabin and knocked timidly at the door. A squint-eyed native, so old that his yellow face was a curious net-work of wrinkles, admitted him.

"I want drink and food," Dick informed the man, stumbling over the Indian words.

The old man nodded acquiescence, leading the way into the house. He clapped his hands together sharply and waited. From the loft above, there came immediately the sound of shuffling feet, then a form, even more senile than that of Dick's host, slowly descended a rickety ladder, emitting as it came a series of rheumatic groans. The woman, following instructions from her husband and a half-timid stare at Dick, hobbled into the adjoining room and returned presently, carrying an earthern pot, which she placed upon the floor in front of her visitor. It was a cold but not unsavory mixture of fish and vege-

tables and Dick, weak from hunger, carried the food to a bench at one side of the room and began eating with avidity.

Thus far, he had not been successful in finding any trace of Toma. Neither had he seen any of the outlaws, although he was sure they must be somewhere in the vicinity. Probably a few of them had even passed by this cabin. Dick had learned a little Cree and he decided to question the old Indian. After several unsuccessful attempts, he finally gained the information that a number of pack-horses, in charge of three men, had crossed the basin only a few hours previous.

Dick received the news with a joyous quickening of the heart. From the native's description, Toma was one of the party.

"Which way were they travelling?" came his next eager question.

He expected, of course, to hear that they were going east in search of the remainder of the ponies, but to his surprise the Indian pointed westward. This meant that he and Toma had passed each other only a short time before. The guide, having completed a successful search, was returning to the coast.

It was cheering information and Dick decided that as soon as he had finished his welcome repast and had rested for a short time, he would retrace his steps and rejoin his friends. Putting aside the

empty dish, he turned eagerly upon his host, just as that worthy stepped back from his place by the door, fear and dismay depicted in his watery old eyes. Almost simultaneously, there fell across Dick's sensitive ears the sound of approaching footsteps, then a voice that caused him to experience a momentary sensation of chill.

With a finger on his lips as a warning to the native, Dick scurried up the ladder, pulling it up after him. His hands were shaking. He deposited the ladder on the floor, tiptoed across the loft and lay down with his eyes at a crack.

The door of the room below was pushed rudely open, without even the formality of a knock, and three men—all of them outlaws—entered. Of the three, one was a white man—the sailor who had come ashore with the captain of the yacht. He wore a gray cap and a much-soiled suit of clothes—apparel too thin for that climate! He sat down shivering close to the fireplace, extending his blue, unmittened hands toward the blaze. He did not even look up as one of the other outlaws called loudly for food and growled unpleasantly when it did not appear forthwith.

While they ate, Dick lay watching them. He hoped that none of the outlaws would make a search of the house. Even if they did—now that the ladder was pulled up—he was fairly sure they would not come to

the loft. He was feeling comparatively safe, until he became conscious of a step behind him. Then he became panic-stricken. His tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. He had hardly the strength to turn his head as the apparition passed, a young Indian girl not over seventeen or eighteen years of age. She had paused, looked at him in a sort of bewildered manner, then moved forward, picked up the ladder, let it slip through the hole in the floor, and proceeded to climb down to the room below.

Dick's breath caught as he thought about the ladder projecting there through the aperture, where the Indian girl had left it. It was a strange trick of fate that had been played upon him at a most inopportune time. The outlaws now had easy access to the loft. It would be simple enough indeed to come up and take him like a rat in a trap.

Also, there was another horn to the dilemma. Unwittingly, the girl might blurt out something about his presence there. And if she did, the outlaws would hear it immediately and the game would be up. The very imminence of the thing was not conducive to Dick's peace of mind. Lying there, not daring to stir, expecting at any moment to hear the ladder creak under the weight of one or more of his enemies, he sweated in an agony of apprehension. He had left his rifle below and, unfortunately, his revolver was empty. Desperately, he looked about him for

some sort of weapon that he might use in his own defense. He could see nothing. Except for the blankets in the far corner, the loft was bare. A small pocket-knife was the only thing he had that would be of the slightest service in a hand-to-hand encounter.

Soon afterward, one of the outlaws turned upon the Indian woman and demanded more food. She shook her head, informing him in Cree that there was nothing more in the house. The outlaw apparently did not believe this and, in a sudden burst of anger, advanced and shook her roughly by the shoulder.

The girl intervened. With a tiger-like spring, she bounded forward, slapping him across the face. In a blind fury now, he attempted to retaliate, but she eluded him and ran to the center of the room. Here he caught her, but released her with a snarl, as her teeth sank into his arm. Eyes blazing, he grabbed for her again, but she dodged past. His long fingers caught in a string of beads, tearing it from her neck. Then Dick's heart seemed to stand still. She had started up the ladder, the outlaw in hot pursuit.

During the next few moments Dick's movements were performed subconsciously—and with the speed of desperation. The girl's head had appeared in the aperture, when he jumped past her. Feet foremost, he crashed into the repulsive up-turned face;

crashed into it, then went down—girl, outlaw and ladder together—landing with a terrific impact that shook the house.

Stunned, he and the girl separated themselves from the confused muddle and struggled to their feet. The outlaw, however, did not stir. When Dick sprang forward and seized his rifle, the man still lay there, one brown, claw-like hand still retaining three or four unstrung beads.

CHAPTER XVIII

A DUSKY FRIEND

No sooner had Dick picked up his rifle than he realized that he could not possibly escape the second half-breed and the sailor who stood by the fireplace. The odds were against him. The sailor had covered him with an ugly-looking automatic, while the breed's rifle was held at a threatening angle. He put down his gun as quickly as he could, deciding to face the situation squarely. Reaction from his first spasm of fear had left him calm and cool, his mind on the alert.

"You're too many for me. I'll give up."

"You showed a lot of good sense there," approved the sailor. "We sure would o' drilled you, Buddy, if you'd made another move. Looks as if you'd done about enough damage now."

Dick turned his head and looked again at the crumpled form of the girl's assailant.

"I'm sorry this had to happen. I guess he'll recover."

"Playing the hero stuff, eh?" leered the sailor. "She ought to feel pretty proud o' your work. I must say you made a good job o' it."

Dick flushed, but did not reply. He was watching the half-breed, who had advanced upon the old Indian and had demanded a rope with which to bind his prisoner. He saw the old man shake his head. The watery old eyes, set in the curious net-work of wrinkles, roved fearfully from face to face. Would the outlaw please believe him? He spoke the truth. God was his witness.

The half-breed considered the problem for a short space, his crafty gaze darting here and there around the room. In spite of his host's assertion to the contrary, he was sure that the old man was not telling the truth. He walked into the kitchen and came back, shaking his head. He scrambled up to the loft, where Dick heard him prowling around, muttering to himself. He reappeared, at length, carrying a thick woolen blanket, which he had taken from the girl's bed. Producing a hunting knife, he cut this into strips about two inches wide, and in a short time had Dick bound as securely as if he had used moosehide thongs or manilla rope.

"Kind o' hard on you, ain't it, Buddy," sympathised the sailor. "If it was me now, running this show, I'd let you go free. 'Cause we ain't got no particular quarrel with you. But his nibs here seems to think that you require special attention."

Dick and the sailor kept up a desultory conversation for the next two or three hours, the sailor do-

ing most of the talking. He bitterly regretted the circumstances that had brought him here. He spoke contemptuously of his two companions. They were not his sort. He liked neither of them. During the day he had suffered from cold and exposure and had undergone a terrible agony caused by blistered feet. This was no country for a white man.

"If I had my wish right now, Buddy, I'd be aboard the 'Elenore,' steamin' down along the coast," he declared presently.

"You should have remained behind when the outlaws broke out of the warehouse," Dick reminded him.

"What! Stay there, an' later on get throwed into jail? I should say not. Even if I do have to suffer now, I can mebbe make my way back to the States somehow."

"They'll get you sooner or later," Dick argued.

"Mebbe so, but I'll take my chances."

The room became more quiet. The old Indian and his wife and daughter retired to the loft, leaving the outlaws in full charge. The man, whom Dick had hurt in his leap from the top of the ladder, had recovered consciousness, but was as yet too dazed and shaken to do more than lie groaning in the corner, where he had been carried. His friend —he who had bound Dick—paid little attention either to this manifestation of suffering or to the

conversation between Dick and the sailor. In a short time he had begun to drowse, chin on his chest, eyes half open. With a friendly nod to Dick, the sailor rose from his place by the fire, and, using his coat as a pillow, lay down upon the hard floor.

Two candles furnished light for the room. One had been placed on a shelf on the wall, the other on a small table by the door, leading to the kitchen. Except for the ruddy glare from the fireplace, there was no other light. When the other occupants of the room had fallen asleep, Dick rolled restlessly from side to side. Occasionally, his gaze fell upon the candles. Both had burned low, now flickering and fluttering eerily. The shadows deepened. When he awoke, following a fitful nap, one of the candles had gone out. The fire also had burned low. Its feeble red glow cast a weird and ghastly shaft of light across the floor. As Dick turned his face to the wall, the remaining taper sputtered and burned down.

Again sleep claimed him—this time deep and unbroken for several hours. He was startled into wakefulness by a loud banging at the door. A match flared through the darkness, footsteps sounded across the floor, the bolt was slid back to admit two muffled forms. The two newcomers, accompanied by the man who had bound Dick, strode over to the fireplace and piled on more fuel.

In the ruddy glow that sprang up shortly afterward, Dick recognized them both—two more of the packers who had escaped from the warehouse.

For nearly an hour, the three jabbered unabatingly in Cree. Dick was able to understand a good deal of what was said. He followed their long, rambling discourse with increasing interest. Here was news indeed! A plot! The eavesdropper caught his breath, felt his pulses leap quickly.

They proposed on the following morning to set out for the warehouse to rescue Murky and the others. But it was more than a mere rescue. It was to be an ambuscade. From different directions they would creep up within rifle range of the policeman and, when the first opportunity presented itself, would riddle his body with bullets. Later on, they would shoot Toma. As soon as Murky had been released, they would recover the fur and travel south.

Then, with a start, Dick heard them mention him. He too would meet the same fate as the others—only much sooner. Was it not a tedious business to drag along a prisoner? Much more simple to dispatch him with a knife or bullet before starting. Anyway, it was no more serious an offense to kill three men than two. The punishment would be the same if they got caught. But that was unthinkable. They would escape easily this time. It would be very simple.

"Is not all this true, brothers?" inquired the chief conspirator.

There came guttural assent. Emphatic nods of confirmation.

"Is there anything to eat in the house of this doddering old spy?" one of the newcomers wished to know.

The answer came in the negative.

"Or drink?"

"There is nothing, my brother."

"Then we will sleep."

They proceeded to do this with a celerity that was astonishing. Soon their heavy snoring rumbled across the stillness of the room.

The hours passed slowly, seeming interminable. Dick slept by fits and starts. Once he awoke, conscious of a strange feeling. Had he heard someone moving about? He lay very still, endeavoring to catch the sound again, but although he listened for a long time, it was not repeated. He was almost asleep again when soft footfalls issued from the loft. A faint cushion-like tread, a creak of the ladder, then a vague form groping about the room.

The person, whoever it was, paused and remained perfectly still for several tense moments. Again the soft footfalls. Another pause. The ghostly visitor was getting closer now—almost within reach of Dick's arm, had he been able to use it. The figure advanced another step; a hand groped forth experi-

mentally. Dick's heart almost stopped beating. Dark as it was, he caught the gleam of a knife.

The Indian girl! A surge of elation swept over him. She stooped down and a moment later his bonds were cut. He was free! It seemed incredible. He was free! He could move his numb and aching limbs. Under the stress of a great emotion, he reached up and patted his rescuer's soft cheek. Just then he could have shed tears of happiness.

Not even a whisper had passed between them. The girl pressed the knife in his hand, and then, to his utter astonishment, a bulky object, which he knew immediately was his own automatic. Abruptly she left him. The soft footfalls across the floor, the faint creak of the ladder, a rustle in the loft above—followed by a deep, unearthly silence. Dick lay, eyes open wide, staring out across the room. The girl had not been heard. The whilom packers still slept, as their deep breathing attested. His chance had come!

He sat up cautiously, his gaze turned in the direction of the door. It was about twelve feet away. To reach it, it would be necessary to pass the sleeping form of the half-breed who had bound him. Trembling, he arose, feeling his way ahead but had gone only a few steps when he stopped short in uncertainty. No longer could he hear the man's deep breathing. Was he awake? Fully five minutes passed before Dick again essayed to move, to dare

take the risk. Then, gaining more confidence, he tiptoed straight to the door, one hand reaching out to shoot the bolt.

Two spurts of flame stabbed the dark, a hurtling form missed him by a scant three inches as he swung open the door. He leaped outside and started away on a run. The wind tore at his clothes. His parka slipped from his head and fell to the ground. Through the smothering obscurity of the night he raced wildly, in his terror imagining that he could hear plainly the patter of footsteps behind. Never once did he slacken his speed until he had reached the foot of the slope, leading up from the ancient bed of the lake. Here he stopped short, choking for breath, listening fearfully for the sound of his pursuers.

Dick did not deceive himself in believing that no attempt would be made to recapture him. Even now the outlaws had probably left the cabin and were in swift pursuit. He paused in the shelter of a bush to strike a match and consult his watch. To his surprise, it was now nearly six o'clock. Dawn would soon break and it behooved him to put as many miles between him and his pursuers, as possible.

He went on through the pitchy darkness that obscured the earth. He had a fair sense of direction, but at length he became confused. For all he knew, he might be travelling miles off his course.

When the first faint light of day streaked the east, he paused in dismay. His fears were confirmed. He had been walking south instead of west, and it would be necessary to retrace his steps. His heart was heavy as he turned to the right and struck off through a wilderness of rocks and trees that encompassed him on every side.

Daylight found him on the shore of a small river, not yet frozen over, whose icy waters cascaded down from the hills. He knew that if he followed this stream, it would lead him eventually to the ocean. He struggled on, conscious of fatigue and hunger. His feet were blistered and sore. His clothing was torn. An unexpected fall on a slippery rock had wrenched his right wrist, causing him excruciating pain. He was moving slowly along, wondering how much farther he would be compelled to go before he reached the coast, when a tall figure stepped out from its concealment of rocks, less than fifty yards ahead. It was one of the outlaws.

For a time despair choked him. Then he jumped quickly to cover and hurried back over the selfsame route he had come.

CHAPTER XIX

A GAME OF HIDE-AND-SEEK

During the next few hours, Dick engaged in a grim and desperate game of hide-and-seek with the outlaws. On several occasions he escaped death narrowly. He turned hither and thither, like a hunted animal, only to find his path barred by one or more of his enemies. Finally, in a last despairing effort to save himself, he struck off toward a high hill, on the crest of which were lofty rocks and towering pinnacles—broken and jagged slabs of granite. Here he would make his stand. Even though surrounded, he would have a chance to ward off attack. If necessary, he would remain here all day and make another break for freedom with the coming of darkness.

Climbing up, he reached the natural fortress and breathed a sigh of relief. He had neither food nor water. From a bush, which grew in a crevice in the rocks, he gathered fuel with which to start a fire. Then he sat down to wait.

In all his experience, he had never suffered more than upon this occasion. His stomach gnawed with

hunger. He shook from exhaustion. Bareheaded, moccasins almost cut from his feet, clothing soiled and tattered, hands and face scratched—his appearance beggared description. His cheeks were hollow, while his eyes shone with a feverish, almost insane light.

After two hours of inaction, squatting miserably in front of his fire, he began to wonder if, after all, the outlaws had not abandoned the chase. In an effort to find out, he slipped gingerly over his barricade and scrambled down to the ledge below. He could command a good view here. His eyes roved the surrounding woodland. Everywhere he looked —but he could see no one. The silence was intense, deep, a sort of rhythmical beat pulsating through dead space under the vast dome of the sky.

His heart leaping with joy, he decided to quit his post and resume his journey. But something made him hesitate. An almost indiscernible movement along the slope below attracted his attention. He ducked quickly. A bullet whistled over his head. Angry and disappointed, he climbed back to the safety of the rocks.

How he would ever manage to endure the long and tedious wait for the coming of night, he did not know. The strain was so great that he decided more than once to walk boldly out and give himself up. Even death was preferable to this. Time after time, he rose and with bloodshot eyes stared out

toward the west—to the broad, green expanse of the Pacific. If only Corporal Rand or Toma knew of his trouble, they would come to him. Sometimes, sitting moodily, chin resting in his hands, he thought of Sandy back at Settlement Mountain and wished that he were with him. Why had he been so eager to come in pursuit of the pack-train?

Night came as slowly as a limping beggar to a gate. Shadows deepened. Strange silhouettes appeared along the slope. Not a breath of wind stirred the trees below. The sounds of the forest were buried in the evening's hush.

One hour more—and he would make his final break for safety. Impatiently, he rose and began pacing back and forth in the narrow, confining space, swinging his numb arms against his shivering body.

Suddenly, Dick's hand went to his automatic in a quick, convulsive movement. But he did not draw his gun. Instead, he grinned sheepishly, staring at the dusky face which peered up from below.

"Hello," he sang out.

The Indian girl smiled and clambered up to the perch beside him. She spoke in Cree:

"They did not see me come. I will help you. Does monsieur know where he is?"

With the few Indian words at his disposal, Dick endeavored to explain his case. He admitted that he had become confused. He could see the ocean,

but it was still a long way off. In an attempt to escape his pursuers, he had been forced to travel in the wrong direction. How far was he now from her home?

"You are very close," replied the girl. "If it were not for the heavy woodland just over there, in the light you would be able to see it."

"How did you find out I was here?" queried Dick.

"From your enemies," the girl answered unhesitatingly. "One of them came to my father's house a short time ago and asked for food. I overheard him tell my father that you had sought concealment on this hill. So I came at once to help you, monsieur."

"Where are the outlaws now?"

"One is hiding in the tree below, waiting for you to come out. Very soon this one will be joined by the man who went to see my father. Three others have gone down to the coast to intercept you, should you escape."

"Did I understand you to say that your home is not very far from here?"

"Yes, monsieur. Less than two miles."

Two miles! Dick's mouth set in a grim, hard line. All day long he had been scrambling, struggling, fighting his way through trees and underbrush, over tortuous rocks—and yet had proceeded no farther than that. The thought galled him, made him feel a little foolish.

The girl spoke again. In her excitement, she spoke so rapidly now that he found it almost impossible to understand her. However, there was one word she emphasized, frequently reiterated. The boat! She would lead him thither. Monsieur would row the boat. She knew exactly where to find it. His escape would be certain. They must hurry before the other outlaw came back.

"She intends to accompany me all the way to the coast," thought Dick, a flush of embarrassment suffusing his cheeks.

He attempted to voice a protest, exhausting his complete stock of words in an endeavor to make her understand. But to no avail. She repeated the word, pointing away to the south.

"The boat is three miles from here. I will take you there," she explained to him.

The fugitive scratched his head in perplexity. What did she mean? A boat three miles away. Why, there wasn't even water over there. The ocean lay to the west—ten or twelve miles distant. The thing was absurd, preposterous!

Then, suddenly, there came to him a glimmering of the truth. He thought he knew now. She referred, no doubt, to some sort of navigable stream, along the shore of which was moored a boat, belonging to her father.

With a nod to the girl that he understood and was ready to start, he jumped quickly to the level

surface of the rocks above, took her hand and helped her down to the ledge. From there they set out through the rapidly gathering darkness. An hour later, without mishap, they pushed their way through the pines to the edge of a wide stream, where, sure enough, they found the boat. Hurriedly, Dick made ready for his departure. Arctic night had fallen. Above them, through a rift in the heavy clouds, a few faint stars were visible.

He turned for a last look at the little Indian girl who had brought him there. A few yards away she proceeded through the pines and presently her dark silhouette became lost to view. With a slight constriction of the throat, Dick swung about and pushed off, his pulses quickening again at the thought of the danger which might lay ahead. In two hours he had floated along the swift current and had entered a narrow arm of the sea.

Thus far he had drifted leisurely along, every sense alert, endeavoring to make as little noise as possible. If he could negotiate a mile or two from shore he would feel comparatively safe. After that there was little likelihood that the outlaws would ever overtake him. Paddling north, he would enter the inlet. He hoped he would arrive in time to warn Corporal Rand and Toma.

As the minutes went by, hope grew in his breast. Conditions, he perceived, were ideal for his escape—almost complete darkness and a stretch of smooth

water ahead. Every little while he paused to look around in apprehension. Once, with a quick start, he thought he had heard something. Paddle raised, he permitted the boat to drift for a moment or two, panic in his heart. But the sound was not repeated.

Pursuit, he felt, would come from behind; the outlaws might secure boats somewhere and attempt to overtake him. Looking for pursuit from the shore, he was wholly unprepared for what actually happened. A little later, just as he had begun to believe that he was out of danger, unexpectedly through the velvety gloom that had settled about him, ahead—not behind—there loomed a shape, a dark smear across his troubled vision.

It was so close that escape seemed absolutely out of the question. Notwithstanding this, Dick turned and started back. Frantically his paddle cut the water for ten or fifteen yards, then a guttural voice rang out and immediately the night became a medley of sound; rifles cracked forth, oars splashed, vivid spurts of red flame flashed through the dark, while all around him the water hissed and sputtered where struck the lead from Murky's murderous crew.

A bullet whistled close to his ear. Another tore through the loose sleeve of his coat. At this juncture, he dropped his paddle, and, in an effort to retrieve it, nearly capsized. As he came back to a sitting position, his craft rocking perilously, a small piece of wood, torn from the side of the boat, struck

him full in the mouth. Dazed, he put up one hand to his face, feeling the warm blood trickling down through his fingers.

In desperation, Dick abandoned all hope of escape, deciding to sell his life as dearly as possible. Revolver in hand, he crouched in the stern. The outlaws' boat was closer now, sweeping down upon him at top speed. He had barely time to empty his revolver at the oncoming craft before it crashed into him. They had deliberately run him down. He was in the icy water now, coughing, choking, attempting to dodge the bullets of the half-breeds by diving under the surface.

It would be more difficult to see him now. He would fight to the last. Thank God, he could swim!

CHAPTER XX

THE INVALID

Strong arms raised him up and carried him tenderly along the beach as one might have carried a child. Anxious eyes peered down at the placid face; voices, subdued and solicitous, murmured around him. Near at hand, the river fretted against its shores, its gurgling song more melancholy than the plaintive dirge of the pines.

Wading ashore, following his last encounter with the outlaws, Dick had collapsed, and, when found later by the rescue party, lay with his feet in the water and his arms flung out above his head. At first, they had believed him dead. No senseless, inanimate thing cast up by the sea, ever presented a more bedraggled appearance. The stubborn spark of life, which still glowed feebly within him, was not manifest. Corporal Rand, who had elected to carry him back to the shelter of trees, where Toma had already kindled a fire, could have sworn that his young friend had fought his last fight.

The sound of firing had carried to the inlet, and had been the cause of much concern and conjecture

on the part of Dick's companions. Both surmised that the youthful adventurer was in trouble and they had come expecting to find him in some tight corner, hotly besieged, yet valiantly holding his own. They were wholly unprepared and not a little mystified, when after a painstaking search, they finally stumbled upon his body.

Neither could explain how Dick had come there nor exactly what had happened to him. The nearest approach to a reasonable solution was that Dick in some unaccountable manner had been knocked unconscious and then thrown into the water—left there by the outlaws to drown. The cold plunge had partly revived him and he had contrived somehow to swim or crawl ashore.

"I doubt if he'll live," Rand's voice was sepulchral.

For hours they employed restorative measures. Toma went back to the warehouse to fetch a blanket. They chafed his limbs; built up a huge bonfire; worked desperately over him. Just before morning Dick lay in a comatose state, his pulse more steady, his condition considerably improved. Faint color began to tinge his cheeks. After a time, his eyes opened dazedly and with much wrinkling and puckering of his brow he endeavored to fill in his gaps of memory.

Wraiths and shadows of once familiar things drifted across his mental vision. Through the darkness and obscurity of his mind, not in orderly

sequence, but in a provoking, mysterious fashion, there flashed haphazardly half-familiar scenes of the past.

Toma, stooping to smooth back the rumpled hair, glanced sombrely at the policeman opposite.

"You think him better?" he demanded in a strained, cracked voice.

"Much better," answered the corporal.

"I glad to hear that. You think pretty soon we be able to move him over to warehouse?"

"Perhaps—but not yet. He's still too dazed and weak. He needs rest and quiet. But he's doing nicely."

They left him while they went to prepare breakfast. When Toma returned to the place where the patient lay, he was greeted with a wan smile of recognition. The Indian lad cried out jubilantly. Hearing him, Rand rushed over.

"Thank the good Lord you're coming round," he cried out. "I can't begin to tell you how happy I am."

They made Dick a light broth and towards noon he was feeling so well he was able to sit up. Always there was one of the two near him. They were compelled to make frequent trips to and from the warehouse. In addition to caring for Dick, they had the prisoners to look after. On the previous night, before starting out, they had bound the four

men hand and foot. There were now extra meals to prepare, increasing responsibility. The larder required replenishing. During his spare time, Toma went out to hunt for rabbits and ptarmigan.

Shortly before two o'clock, the policeman, who had been busy gathering fuel for the fire, came over and sat down by Dick's side.

"Do you feel strong enough now to tell me all about it?" he asked. "How did you get here? How many of the outlaws were in the party which attacked you?"

"Before I do that," Dick spoke up, rubbing one shaky hand across his forehead, "I want to warn you, corporal, that those packers may return. They were planning to rescue Murky and the others and to murder you and Toma. It's queer they haven't already come. You must be very careful."

"Are you quite sure about this, Dick?"

"Yes," the other answered. "An ambuscade! A treacherous, cowardly thing! They planned to secrete themselves in the brush and take pot-shot at you. Later, when they had released Murky and the prisoners, they intended to go south with the fur."

Then Dick recounted his adventures. When he had finished, the corporal exclaimed:

"You've certainly had your share of trouble. It must have been a terrible ordeal."

He rose hesitatingly to his feet.

"Will you think that I am inconsiderate if I leave you for a time alone?"

"Why, no," quickly responded the invalid. "I'm all right. Don't worry about me."

"You see," Rand hesitated, "after what you've told me, I feel a little apprehensive. I must go over and warn Toma. The warehouse will be the point of danger."

Dick smiled weakly. "Certainly, go ahead. It's the only thing to do."

Rand threw more wood on the fire and departed. It was nearly two hours before he returned. The moment Dick saw him, he noted immediately that a marked change had come over the policeman. He was more lighthearted than before. He smiled frequently. He joked and laughed, regaling Dick with stories of the service—amusing anecdotes and breathless escapades. While he was preparing lunch, he looked up and grinned across at Dick.

"I suppose you'll be sorry when this thing is over and we return to Fort Good Faith?"

Dick laughed outright. "Well, not exactly, although I wouldn't have missed the experience for anything. By the way, corporal, how much of the fur did you recover?"

"All of it."

"That's fine. Then all that remains to be done

is to capture the four packers and the sailor. Do you think we'll be able to do that?"

"Yes," smiled Rand, "I have two young but very capable assistants. Tomorrow you'll be on your feet again, while Toma is feeling as fit as a fiddle."

"Toma is wonderful," said Dick. "You can always rely on him. I don't believe he knows what fear means."

"You're right," approved the other. "He'd make an exceptionally good scout, a splendid partner for Malemute Slade. He may get the chance too. When the Inspector receives my report, there'll be several persons I know who'll receive laudatory mention."

Dick gazed dreamily into the fire.

"Then they may send Toma to the training barracks at Regina this winter?"

"Yes, very probably—and another young man, too, if he cares to go along."

"You mean me?" gasped Dick, blinking suddenly, a queer tugging at his heart.

"Well, it's within the realm of reason," Rand looked up mischievously. "But are you sure you haven't had enough of this sort of thing?"

"No, corporal, I'd like to go."

"It isn't an easy life," Rand informed him. "The pay is small. One never knows what tomorrow may bring forth. Your greatest reward will be the satisfaction of knowing that you have strived to do

your duty. If I were you, I'd think long and seriously before I took the step."

"But you took it. Do you mean to say that you regret your move? Would you change places with someone else?"

The corporal's face had become very sober. He too stared dreamily into the fire. In the steel-gray eyes was a look Dick had never seen before. There was a catch in the policeman's voice when he spoke again:

"It's too late to think about that now. I've crossed my Rubicon. It was my own choice—but I'm not sorry. I think I've run the gamut of human emotion. I've experienced every phase of physical suffering. On the other hand, there have been times when the mere joy of living paramounted every other thing. The rugged life that we lead gets into the blood. Even if I should return to civilization, I doubt very much whether I would ever be happy or satisfied."

Dick smiled reminiscently.

"That reminds me of what Sergeant Richardson told me about a year ago, just before he received his promotion. He said that there were times when he gloried in the service; at other times he positively hated it. When he first came to this region, the Inspector sent him out to arrest an Eskimo murderer. It took him eight months. In all that time never once did he see the face of a white man. The

memory of that exploit still haunts him. He weighed a hundred and seventy-eight pounds when he set out on that trip and one hundred and fifty when he returned with his prisoner. All that remained of his uniform was his service hat. His hair and beard were so long that he looked like a wild man. Habit was so strong that when the Inspector addressed him, he answered in Eskimo."

Corporal Rand laughed, but made no comment.

Not long afterward, Toma appeared. His usually expressionless face radiated good nature. He too seemed to be very happy. He sat down in front of the fire, pulled an harmonica out of his pocket and commenced to play. Rand leaned back against a convenient tree trunk and filled and lit his pipe. As time passed, Dick began to wonder if it were good policy to leave the prisoners so long alone. Under no circumstances, ought they to trust Murky.

"Will the prisoners be all right, corporal?" Dick finally blurted out. "Isn't there danger that one of them may become untied?"

Rand shook his head complacently and winked covertly at Toma.

"There! I've caught you, corporal. Something has happened. Have the prisoners already escaped?"

"No, they still here," Toma denied the allegation.

Dick was not convinced. Although the high spirits of his two companions belied the supposition,

he could not help feeling that something was amiss. The more he thought about it, the more perplexed he became. It was not like Corporal Rand to be so careless. Surely experience had taught him better than this.

"Corporal," said Dick, "I think you must be keeping something from me. What is it?"

The policeman feigned annoyance.

"You're mistaken. I can't remember that I've ever given you cause to say that."

The invalid flushed and averted his gaze. He had been sitting up, wrapped in blankets, his shoulders resting against a tree. Just then he felt sheepish and wished that he had held his tongue. He was depressed. But his mood changed suddenly—first to amazement, then to joy. He raised one trembling hand and rubbed his eyes. One long, glad cry rang from his lips:

"Sandy!"

CHAPTER XXI

CAMPFIRE SMOKE

Dick's eyes were shining as Sandy strode up.

"The last person on earth I expected to see!" he shouted. "When did you get here?"

"A few hours ago," replied Sandy, releasing Dick's hand and standing up to look curiously about him. "Corporal Rand was over at the warehouse when we arrived."

"We!" exclaimed Dick.

"Yes. Do you think I came alone? Sergeant Richardson and I left Settlement Mountain a week ago, and I want to tell you we've made quick time."

"But what did you do with your prisoners?"

"Took them back to Wandley's post. Had 'em locked up. While we were there we saw Pearly. He's very much improved."

"I'm glad to hear that," said Dick. "Well, how did you like the trip? I suppose you had difficulty in finding the entrance to Blind Man's Pass."

"We were afraid we would, but fortunately everything turned out all right. You see, Dick, there hasn't been a heavy snow storm since that day we started out with Pearly. We were able to follow

your tracks most of the way. The only place, where we had any trouble at all, was just east of that long ravine. Here the wind had drifted in your trail. We were delayed several hours before we found it again—about a mile farther on."

"I'm anxious to see Sergeant Richardson. How is he?"

"As fit as ever."

There ensued a short interval of silence. Sandy gazed down at his chum, sympathy and commiseration in his eyes.

"I guess you've had a pretty tough time of it. Do you think you'll be able to be around soon? Over at the warehouse, Toma told me all about your experiences."

At the memory, Dick's face shadowed.

"I wouldn't care to go through it all again. I'm glad you weren't here, Sandy. You might not have been so fortunate."

Sandy grinned to himself. "Well, we've had a few exciting moments ourselves. Early this morning we discovered the packers. I suppose Rand told you."

"Packers! What do you mean? Both the corporal and Toma have been as secretive as clams. But once or twice I almost caught them. Tell me about it, Sandy."

The young Scotchman pulled forward a block of wood and sat down.

"It isn't a very long story, Dick. I think our meeting with the packers was as much a surprise to us as it was to them. You see, all day yesterday we had been hurrying along, anxious to get down here to the coast. We were not sure where we would find you. Sergeant Richardson was always looking for the smoke of a campfire. When we were still ten or twelve miles back along the trail, every chance he got he'd climb some hill and scan the surrounding country with his field-glasses.

"We passed several cabins, but he thought it would be better not to make inquiries there. Last night, just before we made camp, he shinned up a tall tree and looked everywhere. He thought he could see the distant glow of a fire, but he was not sure. This morning we rose early. It was still dark when we started out. Sergeant Richardson was in the lead. When daylight came, I remember he turned to tell me that we were not more than four miles from the ocean."

Sandy paused and smiled reminiscently.

"Not long after that we smelled smoke. It was faint, yet one could detect the odor. The sergeant said:

" 'We're pretty close to them now, Sandy. When we find the source of this smoke, I think we'll find them.'

"A little farther on, we saw a blue spiral, twisting and curling up among the trees. We were very close

now. Naturally, I was very anxious to see you all again, and started forward on a run, but the sergeant overtook me, seizing me by the collar. He yanked me into the bush.

" 'Don't be a fool!' he said.

"I thought he was unduly cautious. He warned me to be quiet, to follow him. We advanced toward that smoke spiral as stealthily as a couple of Bengal tigers. I'm here to tell you, Dick, that I'm mighty glad now that we did.

"I guess you can imagine our surprise. Not you at all—not any of you! Instead four dirty half-breeds and a queer-looking duffer of a white man. I was disappointed. I didn't have the least idea who they were, and supposed, of course, that we would leave them and proceed on our journey. I recall plucking at the sergeant's sleeve and whispering something about hurrying along on our way.

"But for some reason, Richardson was suspicious. He instructed me to remain there while he crawled closer. The men were eating their breakfast and talking amongst themselves. Richardson wanted to hear what they said.

"I was annoyed over the delay. I wasn't the least bit interested in those half-breeds.

" 'We're just wasting valuable time,' I told myself.

"After a time, a rabbit hopped up close to where I was sitting and I became interested in him. I had

just chucked a piece of bark at him, when I heard a sudden commotion. Someone was talking in a loud voice.

"It was the sergeant. There he stood with a gun in his hands, bawling out orders. The half-breeds and the funny duffer in the gray cap were huddled in front of him like a flock of frightened sheep.

"Even then it didn't occur to me that they were Murky's packers. I guess I was a little bewildered. The thing had happened so suddenly. I heard Richardson calling me.

"It was the white man who told us the story. He said he was sick of the whole business and was ready to quit. He said he hadn't done anything wrong anyway, but even if he had, he preferred jail to another day in that wilderness. He was only a common sailor, he told us, and would be mighty glad to get back to his ship. Until just recently, neither he nor any of the other sailors knew that the fur had been stolen. Captain Reynolds, master of the yacht, had told them a very plausible story and they had believed it."

Sandy paused again.

"There isn't much more to tell. We reached the warehouse less than an hour later, where we found Corporal Rand and his prisoners. Maybe you think I wasn't glad."

Dick looked up into his chum's face and smiled.

"I'm glad too. This surely came as a surprise to me. It won't be long now until we can return to Fort Good Faith."

Sandy rose to his feet. He stretched his arms above his head, yawning lazily. Suddenly his hands dropped and he stared in surprise.

"Look, Dick! Here comes Sergeant Richardson. He's bringing all the prisoners."

CHAPTER XXII

MURKY'S CONFESSION

MURKY NICHOLS was a changed man. His spirit had been broken. No longer he assumed his defiant attitude, his blustering, cock-sure manner. His sins had found him out. He had been caught in the toils of the long-reaching arm of the police.

Whenever he was spoken to, he answered in monosyllables. For the most part, he sat brooding, eyes downcast, tormented by his thoughts. A short time before the police party prepared for its departure, he stirred from his lethargy and beckoned to Sergeant Richardson.

"There's a few things I'd like to tell yuh. I know what yuh all think—that I've always been a bad egg an' a crook. Yuh believe I've been runnin' stolen fur through to the coast here fer a good many years. But that ain't the truth."

"What is the truth?" inquired Richardson.

"First, Sergeant, I'd like tuh ask yuh a question. How long do yuh think it's been since I found out about the pass?"

"I can't imagine, Murky. Tell me."

"Eight years," replied the outlaw. "It was eight years ago that I found it."

"*You* found it?"

"Yeh," drawled Nichols. "It was me. I was prospectin' then an', whether yuh believe it or not, I'd always been honest—never done a wrong thing. It was in the spring o' the year. I'd been havin' some hard luck the previous summer, pannin' gold up along the Lobstick River. I was broke all the followin' winter an' when spring come Wandley staked me to a grubstake fer another try at gettin' back what I'd lost.

"Durin' the winter I had talked with an ol' Indian, who used to live on Settlement River. He told me that about twenty years before a white prospector had made a big strike in the foothills west o' Settlement Mountain. I decided to go there, though as a usual thing I don't put much stock in these yarns o' the Nitchies.

"So jus' before the first big thaw, I slips out there, while the frost is still in the ground an' builds me a small shack. Mebbe yuh saw it—a little way back from the ravine that yuh come into before reachin' the pass. Well, I prospected through that country an' one day I struck it rich. Nothin' very big, sergeant, but it looked good to me then. I had nearly two thousand in gold by midsummer. I was able to square my account with Wandley, an' I had a nice little nest egg to keep me goin'.

"One day, lookin' for new pockets, I slipped down into the ravine an' begins to follow it up. I kept

movin' westward an' after a while I reached the end an' saw that big crevice in the rock. Bein' kind o' curious, I walked through an' came out into the pass."

The gloomy face of the big prospector brightened perceptibly. He paused, mumbling to himself. Just then he was living in the past.

"At first, I couldn't hardly believe what I seen. Here was a big valley in the very heart o' the mountains. I remembered the ol' Nitchie yarn about Blind Man's Pass. I began wonderin' if this was it. I made up my mind that it wouldn't do no harm to investigate. I spent two weeks out there an' finally when I went back to Wandley's, I had a secret. I knew that 'most everybody would be glad to hear the good news.

"The first man I see at Wandley's is O'Connell. He's been busy all summer freightin' supplies. I guess he'd about cornered ever' available pack-horse in the country. Him an' Hart, 'count o' the bad condition of the trails, wasn't makin' very good headway. O'Connell tells me he has thousands o' pounds to take out, an' no way to do it. He has a big shipment ready to send 'round to the coast but don't durst tackle it.

" 'Which way yuh going?' I asks.

" 'Yellowhead Pass,' he answers.

" 'Kind o' long trip,' I says.

" 'Yeh, it sure is,' O'Connell shoot back. 'An' I

dread it. The trails down that way is mighty near impassable.'

"It was jus' on the tip o' my tongue to tell him about my discovery, when somethin' makes me change my mind. There'd be nothin' in it fer me if I tells what I knew, an' besides I figgered I ought to be paid fer all the trouble I'd been put to. So I says to him:

" 'O'Connell, what'll yuh give me if I take that stuff through fer yuh?'

"He didn't answer right away, 'cause he thought I was jokin'. He winked at Wandley an' laughed.

" 'Yuh wouldn't get very far,' he tells me.

" 'Mebbe not,' I says to him, 'but I'm willin' to take the chance. Jus' name your price.'

" 'If yuh really mean it,' O'Connell gasps, 'yuh can have the whole blamed contract an' good luck to yuh. The summer rains have made the trails so bad that I won't be able to get through fer another month.'

"We talked an' figgered fer a while an' finally I gets the contract. I'm to get nine hundred dollars an' keep seven hundred fer myself. I could tell by the way he acted that he thought he'd beat me pretty bad in the deal. So did everybody else. They was all laughin' up their sleeves, thinkin' about what a fool I had made o' myself. Wandley calls me to one side.

" 'Murky,' he says, 'yuh jus' made a hasty contract. Yuh better change your mind before it's too late. You'll lose all the money yuh made up in the hills this summer an' mebbe a lot more besides. O'Connell knows he can't make a cent on that west coast shipment, an' you're playin' right in his hands. Yuh better see him now before he leaves an' tell him you've changed your mind.'

" 'What would you like to bet I can't make it?' I asks him.

" 'You may be able to make it, but you'll lose money. Don't try it, Murky. Yuh ain't no packer to begin with. It stands to reason that if O'Connell is afraid o' it, it's no good.'

"I thanked him, but I stuck to the contract in spite of what everybody said. I bought some packhorses an' O'Connell lent me five o' his. My greatest trouble was to find packers I could trust to keep their mouths shut about the pass. You see, I wanted to keep that a secret. It took me nearly two weeks to get my crew together an' load up the stuff.

"In order to deceive everybody," Murky resumed after a short pause, "we started out in broad daylight over the regular trail leading to the Yellowhead. They all jeered at us when we left Wandley's. Two days out, we left the trail, circled back, an' then one dark night slipped down into the ravine an' entered the pass."

At this point, Sergeant Richardson interrupted the narrator.

"To whom was the shipment consigned?" he asked.

"To a free trader named Bentley," Nichols promptly replied. "He was jus' opening up a new tradin' post in the Goose Lake country."

"Well," Murky continued, "we made a quick trip. I was able to pay my packers almost double what they generally got. Comin' back, we took plenty o' time so as to make it appear that we had gone by the Yellowhead route. But even at that, we was weeks ahead o' the schedule. O'Connell nearly fell out o' his skin. He didn't know what to say an' neither did Wandley. O'Connell offered me other contracts an' fer two years I made some easy money. Then one day he comes to me, an' by the look on his face, I could see somethin' was up.

" 'Look here, Murky,' he says, 'there's somethin' wrong about all this. I've been watchin' yuh. Yuh ain't been takin' none o' the stuff through the Yellowhead. What yuh been doin' with it?'

" 'I don't know as that's any o' your business,' I comes back. 'As long as the shipments reaches their destination, yuh ain't got no kick.'

" 'Yuh've found a shorter route,' accused O'Connell.

" 'Well, what if I have?'

" 'It ain't fair to the shipper,' he says. 'Suppose

it leaks out that he's payin' all this extra mileage. What'll happen to me?'

" 'It don't never need to leak out,' I said.

"But O'Connell is hot-headed, an' he informs me that he's through. He goes away in a huff, an' I don't see him again fer nearly a week. Then he comes over an' tries to make a dicker with me.

" 'How much cash money will yuh take to show me your route?' he says, fingerin' a roll o' bills. 'This thing has gone far enough.'

" 'I ain't in the markey today,' I told him a little huffy. 'Yuh can do your own west coast packin' over any route that yuh like. I won't even listen to yuh.'

"He offered me fifteen hundred dollars but I refused. Finally he goes away, an' fer nearly a year packs his own stuff through the Yellowhead, nursin' a sore spot in his chest. In a way, it was kind o' hard on me too. It had got so that I depended on the money I received from him fer the work I did. After a while, my capital dwindled down to jus' a few hundred dollars. I could see I had to go back to work.

"Along about that time, a Nitchie breaks into the warehouse at Fort Point o' Call an' steal a lot of valuable fur. One o' my packers heard it. The thief was a friend o' his. He had the stuff cached up in the foothills but was afraid to move it for fear he'd get caught."

Murky ceased speaking and sat for several minutes deep in thought. Then he turned upon Sergeant Richardson.

"Yuh see, I was gettin' kind o' desperate, sergeant. This was a big temptation. My money was runnin' low. I thought it over fer a long time an' finally made a dicker with the thief. I agreed to take the fur off his hands an' dispose of it, gettin' one-third o' the money fer my trouble.

"We didn't have no difficulty at all takin' the fur through the pass, an' less than three weeks later I had the money it brought safe in my pocket. The man what bought the fur was a free trader who had been in on some shady deals before, an' I knew he'd keep his mouth shut.

"I guess the money sort o' turned my head. It was all so easy an' simple, that I encouraged the half-breed to try his luck again. The second time we was successful. Then I went into the business wholesale. I got my packers to steal too. Ever' man I hired was a crook. I needed a good confederate so I made a proposition to La Qua an' he accepted it. Pretty soon I had agents all over the country.

"My business grew like a snowball rollin' down hill. It seemed like I couldn't stop it. I laid my plans so well, it was pretty hard fer yuh fellows to catch me. I made friends with Hart an' O'Connell again, agreein' to take out their shipments at a reduced rate. When they accepted my offer, they

didn't know I was usin' them as a sort o' screen to hide my real work—to keep yuh mounties guessin'.

"In the last two years I've made close to two hundred thousand dollars. I was takin' out stolen fur on such a big scale that it didn't seem wise to sell to the free traders any longer. It was too dangerous. So I went to Seattle an' made arrangements with Captain Reynolds to come up here with his yacht several times durin' the year. I built the wharf an' warehouse. I think ever'thing would be all right today if—if—"

"Yes," encouraged the policeman. "If—"

"If it hadn't been fer Daddy McInness," Nichols concluded.

"I'm not so sure about that," Corporal Rand cut in. "We've been suspicious of you for a long time, Murky. The death of Daddy McInness merely brought matters to a head. Murder is a terrible thing, Nichols."

At mention of the word, the prospector went suddenly deathly white.

"I didn't kill him!" he croaked. "Before God, I tell yuh—"

The sentence ended in a groan. Murky turned his head guiltily and looked into the slowly dying fire. For a long time he sat, eyes fixed sombrely on the darkening mass. It was symbolic of his own case—charred hopes and the ashes of defeat, where once had burned brightly the consuming flames of avarice.

CHAPTER XXIII

BACK AT FORT GOOD FAITH

MONTHS later, at Fort Good Faith, Dick and Sandy sat in the trading room engaged in a game of cribbage, when Factor MacClaren strode over to their table, carrying in one hand a month's old copy of an Edmonton newspaper. He interrupted the game by spreading out the paper between them, and turning the pages until he came to the particular item he had just read.

"I knew you boys would be interested," he said, indicating the place at the bottom of the column. "Yesterday when the mail came in, I looked over this copy of the Bulletin, but missed it somehow. Read it."

"All right, Dick," commanded Sandy, "read it aloud."

Dick picked up the somewhat crumpled sheet and commenced breathlessly:

> "Seattle, Washington, Dec. 3.—When the yacht, Elenore, put into harbor this morning at eight o'clock, she was met at the wharf by Revenue Officer Charles M. Steele and Corporal

Dickinson, the latter a member of the Canadian Royal Northwest Mounted Police, with papers for the arrest and detention of the crew. The captain of the vessel, Silas Reynolds, and one sailor were missing.

"It is alleged that the Elenore has been engaged in running contraband and stolen fur from various Canadian points to this port. It is understood that Captain Reynolds is under arrest in British Columbia."

"The long arm of the law," commented Sandy, as he glanced over Dick's shoulder. "I suppose it would have been just the same if they had steamed into Rangoon. In the end, they always get caught."

"Just like Murky did," added Dick.

"Yes, just like Murky. You can't fool the police."

"Especially the Canadian Royal Mounted," appended the other proudly.

In truth, Dick had every reason to be proud. In the inside pocket of his coat there reposed the most priceless of all his possessions—a letter from the commissioner at Ottawa.

His application had been approved. Next spring he and Toma would report to the adjutant at the mounted police training barracks at Regina!

THE END